

An Unexpected Find

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An Unexpected Find

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Summary

Jason didn't mean to adopt a Talon. It just sort of happened, after he found him hiding on the fire escape outside of his apartment and in clear need of help. Now the bar where he works has never had a better protector, plus it's great to have the company at home. If only they didn't have the looming threat of Batman finding out hanging over their heads, everything would be perfect.

Notes

Hello everyone, Fire here! Welcome to my 2019 DCU Bang fic, once again using one of my very favourite tropes for this fandom: Talon!Dick. This year I've been super to lucky in being able to pair up with the lovely Pentapus, who both helped me plan out this story and made the beautiful art to go with it. We hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

He thinks it's a cat, at first. The sound that echoes into the living room of his tiny apartment from the rickety fire escape outside.

Jason, having just arrived home, initially means to ignore it. No part of the building in which he lives is up to code, and probably hasn't been for years before he moved in; he doesn't exactly want to go risking his neck in the rain that's lashing down outside, all for the sake of some mangy stray that will probably only attempt to claw his head off in return for his help. Especially since he's only just managed to get dried off after the long walk back from work himself.

But then the sound repeats itself, echoing over the end of a rumble of thunder into something that, to either man or beast, is instantly recognisable as a cry of pain, and after that he immediately knows he's done for.

"God damn it," Jason mutters, heading into his kitchen to pick out a can of tuna from the cupboard as a peace offering, then also to retrieve the towel he'd used to dry his hair off on from the back of his ratty couch. There's a lot of people around here that would call him soft for what he's about to do, and they're right. He really can't stop himself from needing to look after those who are just as lost and homeless as he once was.

Normally, though, he restricts that urge to volunteering at his local soup kitchen or throwing any spare change he has into various charity drives. Not climbing out onto a steel death trap in the middle of the night to save a kitten.

It takes a couple tries to force the lock on the window open, and Jason is greeted with an icy cold blast of wind to the face the moment he sticks his head out. Fuck, he hates the winters in this city; no longer living on the streets certainly hasn't changed his opinion about that. But he endures it anyway, as well as the drops of rain that start to hit his face like miniature punches in the wind's wake.

Of course, the cat isn't right outside his apartment, that would be far too easy.

"Here, puss," he says, feeling more and more like an idiot as he finishes squeezing through the window. "Here, you asshole cat, I got some dinner for you."

Jason looks first down the levels of the fire escape, then up, searching for some glimpse of fur or bright feline eyes through the slats of metal. It's impressively hard to see thanks to the weather, and made all the harder by the fact that his neighbours are already asleep at this hour, meaning the only source of light around is what comes from his own apartment and the streetlight at the end of the alley. That's what he gets for working in a bar, he guesses.

"Here," he tries again, taking a wild guess and starting to climb up to the next flight while cringing at the way the fire escape creaks underneath his weight. "C'mon, it's tuna. No cat ever says no to tuna."

Well, maybe Catwoman would, but Jason's never been in the position to ask her.

He hisses as another blast of wind hits him when he reaches the next floor, but finally there's the yellow eyes he's been looking for. The only problem is, they don't belong to a cat.

For a brief moment, all he and the owner of the pair of eyes do is stare at each other. Then Jason opens his mouth, getting as far as saying the word "Who—" before, with an ominous groan of protesting metal, all hell breaks loose.

The eyes come towards him at a startling rate. One second, three feet away, the next, right in front of him. Jason gets the impression of light brown skin, black hair and equally dark clothes, before the sudden impact of weight against his chest has him falling backwards, tumbling down to land hard on the next platform below. He yelps at the burst of pain in his back and shoulders; at the starburst behind his eyes when his skull strikes steel. Something else clatters down beside him, the tuna can probably, but he can hardly pay attention to it considering everything else going on. Most noticeably, the sudden application of weight to his chest and a cold blade against his throat.

"Wait!" he shouts, flinging his hands up beside his head. "Wait, wait! Holy shit, don't—!"

"Who are you?!" a low voice demands. "Are you one of his? Did *he* send you after me?"

None of which is exactly what he expected to hear. A threat against his life or a demand for money perhaps, but not that.

"He?" Jason chokes out, confused beyond measure, as well as, quite frankly, terrified by this sudden turn of events. "Who's he? I don't..."

He swallows at the presence of the blade. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know.” the man says, pushing it down harder with his teeth bared and expression wild and furious. “Why else would you come after me?”

Well, fuck him.

“I didn’t come after *you*!”

“Yes, you did.”

“I didn’t!” Jason protests, clenching his hands into fists next to his head. “Fuck, I didn’t even know you were out here! I just heard a noise, that’s all. Like something was hurt.” Then, ridiculously, he adds, “I thought you were a cat!”

That seems to startle his attacker. Those strange eyes blink, far too close to Jason’s face, and he swears he sees a flash of uncertainty pass behind the initial anger. “A cat?” the man repeats dubiously, voice softening.

“Yes!” Jason cries, “Why else do you think I’d come out here, carrying a can of tuna, saying ‘here, puss’ like a fucking idiot in the rain?”

The man glances to the side, presumably taking in the sight of the tuna can wherever it’s landed. If Jason were a braver or more foolhardy person right now, he might take that slight distraction as a chance to fight back. Luckily for him, though, his self-preservation instincts are stronger than that, since the press of the knife against his throat doesn’t let up for an instant.

“I don’t...” Yellow eyes flick back to him warily, then harden. “You could have been using it as a ploy.”

“A ploy?” Jason repeats, incredulously, “If it was a ‘ploy’, do you really think I would’ve let you pin me down like this?” He can feel cold sweat from the stress of the situation starting to soak into his clothes — or maybe that’s just rainwater. “It’d be the shittiest ploy in the world if I did. I don’t even know who you are! Why would I want to attack you?”

“Because—” The man begins, then cuts himself off by biting his lip. Jason notices suddenly that he’s breathing hard, and the hand holding the knife against his throat is shaking slightly, which is not reassuring

in the slightest. “Because *he’s* after me.”

An epiphany strikes Jason then, as he watches the man’s expression shift. It’s not just anger on his face, or confusion. It’s fear. He’s afraid, just as much, if not more, than Jason is. A fact that’s not exactly reassuring, considering how completely dangerous he appears to be. Anyone that can make a man like this one scared is someone Jason is sure he doesn’t want to meet either, and that realisation only serves to exacerbate his own already desperate need to get out of this situation.

“*He* might be,” he says to that end, “But whoever he is, I’m not him. I swear to you, dude, I was just looking to help a hurt animal, which...” He stops suddenly, eyes tracking further down the man’s face to his neck, then his chest. “You kind of... might be. Holy shit, is that blood?”

There’s a rip in the strange suit he’s wearing, and now that he’s focused on it, Jason can make out the dark glisten of blood against the leather. It looks painful, to say the least, and judging by the amount of it, it’s also a wonder the man was able to move to attack him at all.

He stiffens at the question, but at the same time, the knife lifts slightly from Jason’s throat. “It’s nothing.” the man says.

“Uh, no,” Jason says, “That is definitely blood. How in the hell are you still upright?”

The question seems to surprise him more than anything else Jason’s said so far. “It will heal.” is his slow reply.

“Before or after you bleed out?”

Feeling concern for the guy currently holding a knife to him probably isn’t the smartest idea Jason’s ever had, but here he is, doing it. Rather like that time when he tried to make friends with one of stray dogs that lived in Crime Alley after his mom died, right up until the point the ugly thing decided to bite him in the arm for his efforts.

This encounter will probably end the same way, he thinks, because apparently he never learns his lesson when it comes to cornered animals.

“I won’t.” The man says again, even more muted than before.

“Yeah, no,” Jason snorts, “I don’t believe that.” Choosing to take a gamble, he carefully unclenches his hands and makes a motion

towards his apartment window. "Hey, look, I got an idea, why don't we cut a deal? If you don't kill me for no reason, I'll help you patch that wound up so that you don't bleed out from it. There's a first aid kit in my bathroom for emergencies I can use if you'll let me."

Jason can feel himself being examined as the man considers the offer, and the more he looks at them, the more he finds those strange yellow eyes remind him of a hawk, or some other similar bird of prey. It feels like they can see straight through him, into the deepest, most secret parts of his soul, and on the whole, that's not a feeling he likes.

"I wouldn't kill you for no reason." comes the reply, finally. Which would be more reassuring if there were any sort of follow up to it explaining that he has no reason now.

"Good to know." Jason says, trying to put on a brave front. "So, do we have a deal?"

A few more seconds tick by before, reluctantly, the man sags back slightly, then nods. "Yes, we have a deal. But if you try to attack me —"

"Pain, death, murder. Got it." Pleased to know he'll remain alive, at least for now, Jason gives him two thumbs up. "Then, if you'll just get off me..."

Quiet as a whisper, the knife withdraws and the man stands up, movement and posture hardly giving clue to the amount of pain he must be in. Moving a little more slowly, because ow, that fall down the stairs really didn't do his back any favours, Jason follows suit, while also pointedly rubbing at his neck before he stumbles back to his window.

"Wait." the man says.

Jason pauses on the verge of climbing back into the apartment, wondering if he's about to get stabbed in the back because of a sudden change of mind. "What?"

"Can you turn the lights off before I come inside?"

Jason looks back over his shoulder, frowning. He notices suddenly, how the man isn't looking directly at the window, but instead has his gaze cast down towards the alley below. "I... sure, might make my part of the deal that bit harder to carry out, though."

“Please.” is all the man says to that, and Jason’s frown deepens before he nods.

“Okay.”

It occurs to him once he’s inside that he could just slam the window shut behind him, and then, maybe in the time it would take the man to break through it, he could make it to his phone and out of the apartment, possibly to a neighbour’s. Not that any of his neighbours would probably answer if he came hammering at their doors at this time of night, even if they are still awake. Most Gothamites adhere to the age old practice of not getting involved when there’s trouble going down, and this neighbourhood, while better than Crime Alley was in that respect, is no exception.

No, better not to risk it.

Doing as he said he would, Jason reaches the light switch on the other side of the room and easily flips it off.

Only the lightest scrape of wood announces his attacker entering, and now fumbling in the dark, Jason picks up his phone, unlocking it so he can navigate by the faint light the screen gives off, at least. “Make yourself at home, I’m gonna go grab the first aid kit.”

He doesn’t wait to see if the man follows his invitation, just again heads straight to his next destination. The kit’s in the bathroom cabinet under the sink, and thankfully fully restocked from the last time he had to use it on himself. Jason checks over the contents for what he probably thinks he’ll need, picks up a couple more towels to make up for the one he lost outside, then turns back to the door before hesitating again.

He has his phone in hand. There’s a door between them. What if he called the police now? They could come, they could help him...

No, his brain immediately says, as it did with his previous thoughts of an escape plan. Even if they did, the police in Gotham are next to useless. Either that or they’re corrupt — if they don’t drag their feet on the way here, they’ll probably demand some payment for helping him after. That’s if the man doesn’t kill him the moment he hears sirens first.

Clenching his jaw again, Jason heads back into the living room, and only curses a little when he accidentally hip checks the doorframe on his way out.

The man is still standing just inside the room when he gets there, hovering close to the window as if ready to bolt at any moment. A fact Jason can only make out by the faint refraction from the streetlight outside. It's here that he notices that he's actually somewhat smaller than he initially thought he was, as well as a touch more on the side of slim.

"Y'know," he says, trying to act more confident than he actually feels, "You can sit down. I promise I won't mind if you get bloodstains on my couch, it's had worse before I got it."

He's assuming, anyway, since he picked it up for free off a Craigslist ad from what he's pretty sure was a drug dealer's house.

Head ducking down slightly, the man slowly inches over towards it and takes a seat.

"My name's Jason, by the way," he introduces himself, as he comes to kneel down in front of him, setting both the towels and first aid kit on another cushion of the couch. "Figure we should be on a first name basis if I'm about to see you with your shirt off. What's yours?"

Yellow eyes look dubiously down at him. Then, reluctantly, the man answers, "Talon."

"Talon..." Jason pauses for a moment. He remembers a nursery rhyme his mother used to sing to him sometimes during her lucid periods that involved a character by that name, but surely it's just a coincidence. "That's, uh, unusual. Your parents give that to you or did you choose it yourself?"

"No."

"No to which one?"

Talon looks at the bookshelf against the far wall. "Both of them."

"Oh," Jason says, not sure what to say to that. "Um, okay. So yeah, I'm going to need you to take your top off if I'm going to do this."

Black gloved fingers twitch, but after only a second's hesitation, Talon reaches up to the collar of the suit he's wearing and unfastens some hidden catch there, then slowly unzips the front of it.

Jason tries, and fails, not to hiss at the sight of the bare wound once it's revealed, and for a moment, sympathy completely takes over fear.

“Shit, no wonder you’re running scared if this guy that’s after you did that.” He squints at it through the gloom, then says, “I’m going to have to put some kind of light on it, is the flashlight on my phone okay?”

Talon’s lips, soft pink compared to the rest of him, thin. “I would prefer if you didn’t.”

“You don’t like light?”

He looks aside. “My eyes are sensitive to it.”

“Oh.” Jason thinks for a moment, while filing that information away in the back of his mind in case he needs it later. Cat’s eyes. Bird’s eyes. Maybe he’s one of those metahumans that’s always on the news. “I may have a solution for that. Hang on a second.”

Turning from Talon to his coffee table, Jason opens one of the built-in drawers and roots around inside it before pulling out a pair of sunglasses. “Here, try these on.”

Talon takes them from him with surprising delicacy, turning the frames over between his fingers with a frown on his face.

“Go on,” Jason encourages him, “The lenses might be a little dirty, but they won’t bite you.”

As soon as the words leave his lips, Talon is sliding them on. They sit a little awkwardly on his face, threatening to slip down his nose, and the complete effect is... Jason doesn’t want to laugh, exactly, he’s still far too scared for that, but they’re cheap sunglasses, and there’s an odd aura of adorability about it. He allows himself a smile and nothing more. “Better?”

Talon nods, lips still pursed. “Yes.”

“Cool, I’m gonna turn the flashlight on then. Tell me if it’s still too bright.”

Jason quickly locates the app he needs, and when the light flashes on, Talon doesn’t flinch back. He takes that as a win.

“All right, great, hold still. I’m just going to clean the blood away first.” Picking up a wipe from the kit, he gets to work. Talon doesn’t even so much as flinch when it grazes the edges of the wound. “So, uh, your eyes are sensitive to light, huh? That’s gotta be tough.

Especially living in a city like this one.”

Unless he doesn't actually live here and is instead just visiting. The whole getup of him feels like something that would have made its way into Gotham's rumour mill otherwise, just like Batman had.

What if he's a vigilante, too? Or worse, a criminal. Considering the way he'd come at Jason with that knife, it's a distinct possibility. With his own checkered past and personal history with their resident caped crusader, that would be just his luck, wouldn't it?

Talon's head sinks in a shallow nod. “I have a hood, normally, to protect them.”

“A hood, huh? You don't have it with you now?”

“No, I lost it.”

“Because of whoever's after you?”

It's a guess, but the way Talon stiffens up tells Jason he's right on the money with it. Gloved fingers flex restlessly. “Yes.”

“Tough break.” Jason says, trying not to sound too interested. “Tell you what, after we're done here you can keep the sunglasses as well, if you want.”

“What would I have to give you in exchange for them?”

“Let's just call it a bonus on top of the ‘not killing me’ agreement we already have.”

The more blood Jason cleans away, the more he gets a better look at the wound. It's a deep hole cut into Talon's shoulder, like he was stabbed by something. Probably a knife, but bigger than the one he threatened Jason with. The strange thing, though, is that despite the severity of it (at least from Jason's admittedly amateur perspective) it's already clotting, and there's little, if any, fresh blood seeping out to join the old, which goes against everything he knows about shoulder wounds.

“Shit,” he mutters, while trying to understand how that can be. “Looks painful.”

Talon doesn't move, just keep his head bowed. “It's not bad.”

“Not bad? Dude, you have a hole in your shoulder.” Jason looks up at

him incredulously. “On the scale of peachy keen to absolutely fucked, that’s pretty close to a ‘just kill me now’ kind of wound.”

Because of the sunglasses, he can no longer see Talon’s eyes, but there’s a sudden confused tilt to his mouth. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t—what’s not to get? Shoulder wound bad.” At Talon’s continued nonplussed look, Jason sighs. “Y’know what, never mind, just let me get a bandage slapped on this thing.”

He does the rest of it quietly, which is not to say he does it well. Just that he doesn’t talk during the process. It’d be better to drag Talon down to see Leslie Thompkins at the free clinic if he could, but somehow, Jason doesn’t think he’d be particularly keen on the idea, so his own mediocre medical skills will have to do. At least he’s calmed down enough now that his hands no longer shake.

“There,” he says, eventually, “That’s the best I can do. Just keep it clean and try not to move your arm too much. You don’t want to aggravate the wound before it’s had chance to heal. Should probably also change the dressing after a day or two.”

Talon turns his head enough to presumably get a look at Jason’s handiwork, then lightly brushes his fingers over the bandage. “Change it?”

“Yeah, for a clean one.”

He shakes his head. “It won’t be a problem by then.”

“No?” Jason asks, more confused.

“I heal fast.”

He can’t help himself. “How fast?”

Talon fingers curl against the wound. “It’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Jason repeats, startled, while also keeping a wary eye on what he’s doing. “Like, *tomorrow* tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

It’s said so blunt and matter-of-factly, Jason can’t even begin to think how to argue such a statement. Though coupled with the yellow eyes and sensitivity to light, it feels like his earlier theory of Talon being a metahuman is becoming more and more likely. “... right. And is that,

um, normal for you?"

Talon nods, and under Jason's gaze, seems to curl in on himself. It makes him look oddly vulnerable in a way, especially coupled with the fact he's currently shirtless and wearing cheap, tacky sunglasses.

Which, speaking of...

Jason glances back down at Talon's chest, which is lean and muscled, with a light dusting of hair across his pecs. "You can do your suit back up now, by the way."

Again, without words, Talon does as he's told with no complaint, shrugging the black leather back over his shoulders before closing the zipper up the front. Then they're just staring at each other, or so Jason presumes.

"So, uh... I should have brought this up before, but there's a towel there if you want to dry off before—"

"Thank you."

"What?"

Talon returns his hand to his shoulder, touching the spot where the bandage is, now just a sliver of white through the rip there. "Thank you, for this. It's... not something I'm used to."

"Yeah, well, thanks for not killing me. Unless, of course, you're rethinking that." Jason replies. He frowns again, watching as Talon shifts like he's suddenly having trouble staying still. Reaching over, he picks up one of the towels and more blatantly offers it out to him. "Seriously, you should dry off. And what do you mean it's not something you're used to?"

Talon slowly takes it, then lifts the towel up one-handed to rub at his hair.

"Normally, I'm expected to take care of my own wounds."

That sounds suspicious. "By who?"

Talon's motions slow, and Jason finds himself suddenly compelled to repeat his question. "By who, Talon?"

It's like someone took a jumper cable to him. Talon's spine snaps straight, and both arms drop down to his sides alongside the towel.

“My masters.” is what he says.

“Your... masters?”

“Yes.”

“You have *masters*?”

“Yes.” Talon looks perplexed again, like what he just said is a totally normal thing.

“That...” Jason tries not to think the worst, because there are other ways in which that word can be used, such as referring to a teacher in an old kung fu movie or Star Wars, but somehow he doesn’t think that’s the case here. What kind of teacher would leave their student to patch themselves up from deadly wounds? Not a good one, that’s for sure. “That sounds hard. Why wouldn’t they help you themselves?”

Talon shifts, his mouth drawing itself into a thin line. “Because a servant who is too weak to take care of himself is of no use to them.”

Fuck. “Talon—”

“I have to go now.”

He stands up, almost too fast for Jason to follow, and as such his sudden flinch away from the movement causes him to smack his back against his coffee table. God damn it, that’s just what his already existing bruises need: friends.

Fighting the pain off, Jason staggers to his feet to follow after him as Talon crosses to the window. “Wait!”

Talon stops, on the verge of sliding out of it.

“Look,” Jason fumbles, not sure what he’s doing, but still doing it regardless, “I don’t know exactly what your deal is. You almost killed me earlier, and all this shit you’ve told me, that someone’s after you, and you can heal super fast, and you have... fucking *masters*, apparently, is so far outside my wheelhouse, but...” He swallows, “You know where I live now, so I guess what I’m saying is, you need anymore help after this, I’m here. Just, if you do come back, try not to attack me again, okay?”

Talon looks shocked, enough so that Jason actually sees his eyebrows cresting the top of those ridiculous sunglasses. “You...” he starts to

say, then shakes his head, before sliding out the window with the barest whisper of sound.

By the time Jason manages to make it over there to look for him on the fire escape, he's already gone.

"Shit," he mutters. What a weird fucking night, and just when he thought his life was starting to get safely boring as well.

Sighing, Jason shuts the window, leaving the tuna can where it's fallen for the birds to peck at in the morning. Normally, he'd make himself something to eat before heading to bed after his shift, but after the events of the last half hour, his appetite is sincerely gone.

After picking up his phone, Jason spares a moment only to dry his hair again, then walks into his bedroom and strips out of his still damp clothes. The mattress on his bed is a little lumpy, but comfortable once he's settled into the groove he's worn for himself in it.

Thoughts of Talon, and if he's going to be all right out there on his own, occupy him for a good couple more hours before he actually falls asleep.

Jason doesn't tell anyone else about what happened to him that night. Not when, if it weren't for the blood covered wipes left on his couch and the flock of crows out on the fire escape in the morning, he'd be half-convinced he'd dreamt the whole thing up himself.

He picks up the wipes and throws them in the trash, then packs away the first aid kit before returning it back to its usual place in the bathroom. After that, it's back to his usual routine: a shower, breakfast, followed by a couple hours in which to catch up on the world and spend a little time reading before he's heading into work to start prep ready for the evening.

The bar he works at isn't the best job in the world, but it's honest and it pays the bills. Especially since he got promoted to manager, and the owner, Jim, decided to take a step back from running the place. Now, Jason's more or less completely in charge, which is a major step up from when he started washing glasses there four years ago, desperate

to accept any kind of employment that would get him off the streets and away from being forced into more unsavoury ways of getting by.

Luckily, the rest of the staff that he works with there don't recognise anything majorly amiss with him despite the stiff way he moves, and what small concern is registered Jason is easily able to wave off as him just being tired. Which is true, considering he barely got four hours of sleep before coming in, if that. The same goes for the next night, and the night after that, as well. He goes to work, he comes home, and tries not to dwell too much on Talon or where he might be now.

There are more important things in his life to worry about, after all. One random encounter with a superpowered guy in a leather suit doesn't change the fact that he still has to eat and clean his apartment, and help Mrs. Vasiliev down the hall take out her trash since she's been struggling after her husband died three months ago. There's also the studies he's been doing online in hopes of someday working himself up to a college degree to focus on, and those are definitely more important than a stranger who almost killed him one stormy night.

By the end of the week, Jason's more or less succeeded in moving on from what happened and filing Talon away in the back of his mind along with all the rest of the weirdness the city's thrown at him in his life. Which is why it's such a surprise when, after hurrying home that night after seeing the Bat Signal hanging in the sky, he walks into his apartment to find him sitting on his couch in exactly the same spot he did before.

"Holy shit!" Jason says, falling back against the doorframe the moment he's stepped through. "You—Talon?"

The shadow on the couch turns its head at his words, and yes, Jason thinks dazedly at the sight of the familiar suit and those dumb sunglasses he gave him, that's definitely Talon, real and in the flesh.

"Hello, Jason," he quietly says.

"You, uh..." Jason manages to push himself away from the door and then close it behind him. "You're here."

"You said I could come back."

"I did," Jason quickly says, "I did say that. I just... It's been a week, I didn't actually think you were actually going to..." *Break in.* "Fuck,

are you all right?”

On closer inspection, he can see that Talon is still wearing the same suit from a week ago, complete with the tear in the shoulder. Jason also thinks he looks thinner than he did before, with a noticeable gauntness evident in his cheeks. Neither of which are very reassuring signs.

Talon turns his head back down, and noticeably winces as he hurries to push the sunglasses back up his nose. Without hesitation, Jason flicks the main light he'd just turned on in the room back off again. “I didn't know where else to go.”

He sounds almost like a child, lost and unsure, and predictably, it tugs right at Jason's heartstrings.

“What happened?” he asks, more gently now.

“I failed.”

Two words, short and simple, but with a wealth of questions opening up behind them.

“Failed what?”

“My mission.”

Jason frowns. It'd be nice if he could get a little more information out of Talon without having to prod him all the time. His strange, stilted, always direct to the point way of talking is odd in more ways than one, like he can't bear to waste a single syllable. Or perhaps, more like someone else taught him not to.

“Going to need a bit more information than that, bud.” he says carefully. “What mission are you talking about? How did you fail it?”

Talon twitches, then in a surprisingly emotive gesture, wrings his hands together in his lap. “It's better if you don't know.”

Definitely criminal then.

“Maybe,” Jason says evenly, “But you came to me, Talon. Presumably because you want my help. I can't do that if I don't know exactly what it is I'm dealing with or what you need from me.”

The hand wringing continues, then stops all at once. An edge of weariness seems to creep into Talon's shoulders, before he hangs his

head down and admits, “I was ordered to kill someone. An enemy of my masters. But I didn’t. I failed and ran away instead. That’s when I met you.”

Jason thinks back to that night. The wild fear lurking at the corner of Talon’s eyes. His attempt at interrogation. Also the wound, punched deep into his shoulder. “The man who hurt you,” he guesses, “You were supposed to kill him?”

“I never met someone I couldn’t beat before. But him...” Talon shakes his head. “After I left you, I went back to report it to my masters. They were... angry.”

Reacting far less to the news that Talon is some kind of assassin than he probably should, Jason finds himself instead looking again at the hollowness of his cheeks and the way he’s bent over himself. “Did they hurt you?” he asks.

“I failed.” Talon says again, like that’s answer enough, and maybe it is. Jason’s been in that place before, too. The place where any slip, major or minor, was deserving of pain.

And maybe that’s it. Maybe that’s why he’s not reacting to the fact he’s sitting in a room with a killer the way most people would. Because in a way, despite how clearly dangerous he is, Talon doesn’t feel like a threat to him, but instead a kindred soul.

“I’m sorry,” he says, squeezing his hands into fists to control them. “They sound like real assholes.”

The shadows play across Talon’s face as he leans back, and Jason could swear for a moment he sees his lips twitch into a smile, but maybe it’s just a trick of the light. His voice is still somber when he speaks, “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“No?” Jason doesn’t believe that. “Look, if you need some more patching up, I can go grab the first aid kit and—”

“I don’t. That... that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why are you?”

“Because...” Talon seems to brace himself for his next words. “They’re gone.”

“Gone?” Jason repeats. “You mean...”

“Yes. Because of me, because of *him*.” It’s hard to tell what emotions are in Talon’s voice right now. Maybe he himself doesn’t even know. “After I went back, he found them. Found the Court. Now it’s all gone, destroyed. They told me to fight again, and I did, but I...” His head bows back down. “I failed. Again. Now there’s nothing left and I don’t know what to do.”

He says the last part in a rush, like a fervent sinner in a confessional, but while he hears all of it, Jason’s ears have caught on one word in particular above all the others.

“The Court.” he repeats, tasting the capital ‘C’ implied there along the length of his tongue, as well as flashing back to the first thought he’d had after learning Talon’s name: his mother, singing to him when he was a child. “The Court... *holy shit*.” His eyes widen. “You’re actually the Talon from the Court of Owls?!”

He can’t see Talon’s eyes through the glasses, but there’s a definite impression that he’s being judged right now behind the dark lenses. “What other Talon would I be?” he asks, warily.

“I don’t know, I just...” Jason is still reeling. “I thought they were a myth. God, my... my mom used to sing the nursery rhyme to me when I was a kid.”

Which, now that he thinks about it, was all kinds of inappropriate given the content of the rhyme. His mom was never very good at judging that kind of stuff, though, even when she was sober.

“They’re not a myth.” Talon responds, this time with more emotion than Jason’s ever heard from him before. Even more than when he had a knife held to his throat. “They’re real. They’ve been real as long as this city has, and so have their Talons.”

“Talons.” Jason repeats. “Plural?”

“Not usually.” Talon says, confusing him. “I’ve been the only one now for twelve years.”

Twelve years.

Jason stops and takes a moment then to look at Talon. Really look at him. Past the glasses and dark hair, the black leather and gilded metal suit, to the non-existent lines of his face. The graceful, handsome angle of his jaw, his smooth brown skin and soft pink mouth.

“How old are you?”

Talons mouth twists, and Jason knows he’s done something unexpected again. “Twenty-three.”

Twenty-three, which implies that Talon’s been doing this for the Court — the Court that actually, really exists — since the tender age of eleven. He’s been *killing* people since he was eleven.

God, who the fuck sends an eleven year old to kill someone?

“That is fucked up.” he blurts out, before he can stop himself.

Talon looks away from him, and the new curve of his shoulders seems more ashamed than anything. “It wasn’t my choice.” he says, weak like he knows it’s not an excuse. Like he expects Jason to fly off the handle and call him a monster for it at any moment.

“In what way?” he asks, despite not wanting to encourage that thinking. Because he needs to know, to be sure, before he lets Talon stay any longer in his home.

“All of it.” Talon answers. His exhaustion filters through more heavily. “The Court picks its Talons, I didn’t get to say no. I didn’t get to say anything. If I had, I wouldn’t have—” He cuts himself off, and the glance he sends Jason is quick and furtive. “I shouldn’t tell you.”

“They’re gone, remember?” Jason reminds him, “You told me that yourself. You said that’s why you’re here. I’m not gonna hurt you for anything you say. I don’t think I could if I tried. You’d kill me first, easily.”

“I don’t want to kill you.” he hesitates, licks his lips. Then in a moment of obvious daring adds, “I never wanted to kill anyone.”

“And I’m so, so glad to hear it.” Jason scratches his hand. Needing to sit down suddenly, he takes a perch on the edge of the coffee table, which is the only other piece of sittable furniture he has in here besides the couch. “Fuck, this is a lot to take in.”

Talon watches him warily. Like he’s somehow actually a threat to him. “Do you want me to leave now?”

He should, Jason thinks. His common sense filter, that oft heard voice, is telling him how this is too big for him. How he should definitely not get himself mixed up in the kind of shit that’s going on here. He’s just

a glorified bartender and former tyre thief among other things, after all. This kind of stuff is for superheroes, not him, and if he doesn't send Talon away, he'll only be inviting chaos back into his life.

Chaos, and *danger*.

"No," he answers, regardless. "No, I don't. Just... just give me a minute to get my head straight here."

And to think, all this started because he wanted to help a stray cat.

Lurching back up onto his feet again, Jason now walks over to the window while reaching into the pocket of his jacket for his cigarettes. He opens it, then pulls one out before lighting it up, and the first drag instantly soothes his nerves in a way only an addict can understand.

Talon is silent the whole time he's stood there smoking it. Patient in a way Jason doesn't think he could ever be if their situations were reversed. But then, he can't imagine the kind of life Talon's had. One of killing people since childhood, on the orders of those who'd ensure he suffered if he didn't do as he was told. It doesn't sound real, but everything about Talon and Jason's own gut instinct tells him it is. He has an assassin sitting in his living room, and despite everything, he still wants to help him.

"All right," he says, once the cigarette has burnt down to ashes and he's flicked the butt out the window into the alley below. "Just to make sure I got this straight; you're Talon. You're an assassin for the Court of Owls, who are or *were*, in fact, real, and not just a story to scare kids into behaving. Not because you chose to be, but because they made you since you were a kid yourself. Now they're gone, because this guy you were supposed to kill took them out instead. After which, you came here, to me, because you didn't know where else to go. That all correct?"

Talon nods slowly.

"Okay, then I got just two more questions I want to ask you tonight." Because he's already overwhelmed as it is, and figures everything else can now wait until morning. "Number one, are we in any immediate danger from this guy who took out the Court?"

Talon shakes his head. "I've been hiding out in the city for a few days now. If he knew where I was, he'd have come for me already."

"All right, good. So second question," Jason looks him in the eye

through the sunglasses. "Are you hungry?"

Talon doesn't speak for a moment, but the way he visibly swallows is answer enough. "Yes."

"Okay, then I'm going to make us something to eat. After which, I'll grab you some blankets and a pillow so you can sleep on the couch." He pauses on the way to the kitchen, "You should probably borrow some of my clothes to sleep in, too. That suit can't be comfortable if you've been wearing it for a week straight now."

"It's not." Talon manages, watching him walk.

"I'll see if I can wash it later. There's a shower, too, if you want it. Though I gotta warn ya, the hot water only lasts ten minutes on a good day, so you'll have to be quick about it."

"... hot water?" Talon says, and that near enough breaks Jason's heart in the same moment with how quietly hopeful he sounds, as well as everything the fact that he'd even ask implies.

God, if he could go back and time and take a crowbar to these Court people...

"Yes." he replies. "Hot water. There's no cold showers here unless you choose to have them. You wanna take it now while I cook?"

Talon bites his lip as he nods.

"Cool. Follow me, then."

"You're really letting me stay?" Talon asks, as Jason shows him to the cramped bathroom, gets him a towel and some clean clothes. He's still wearing the sunglasses, and again, Jason can't help but find it oddly adorable as Talon stands clutching the bundled fabric in his arms. "You don't want to ask me any more questions?"

"Not tonight." Jason answers. "Tomorrow, yeah, we'll need to talk more. But for tonight at least you can stay." He wants to reach over and place a reassuring hand on Talon's shoulder, but refrains. "Remember, no more than ten minutes or the water will go cold." He steps back to the door. "Oh, and er, just put your suit in the laundry basket. I'll look at it in the morning."

He hears the water start running shortly after he closes the door, and satisfied that at least for now his guest is being taken care of, Jason

heads for the kitchen again.

Grilled cheese and soup sounds like a good option. Not healthy, but hot, filling and comforting, something both of them could use right now.

The next morning, or well, technically afternoon, Jason cautiously leaves his bedroom to find Talon still curled up under the bundle of blankets on the sofa.

He'd woken up an hour earlier, to the delayed memory of everything that had happened after he came home from work. But when those events did come rushing back to him, Jason hadn't been able to do much more than lie in bed thinking about them. Tossing every word over and over in his head while he questioned himself on whether he had, in fact, done the right thing by allowing Talon to stay the night, or even helping him in the first place, until finally he knew he couldn't avoid the consequences anymore and forced himself to get up.

Luckily enough, it's his one day off work for the week, so there's no rush or worry about what he'll do with his guest today when he has to go in. Instead, he can take his time, talk to Talon further like he means to, and hopefully figure something out that's going to work for the both of them once he's awake.

But first things first, breakfast.

Crossing to the kitchen, Jason flicks the kettle on, before reaching into a cupboard to retrieve some cups and drop tea bags in them. He doesn't actually know if Talon likes tea, but he doesn't own any coffee since normally he never has anyone else here, so he'll just have to try it and hope. As for food...

He goes to his fridge and squints at the contents. There's not much, but maybe...

He grabs the eggs, what's left of the cheese, half an onion and an almost expired pack of ham. Given the way Talon had wolfed down those grilled cheeses Jason made last night like they were the best thing he'd ever tasted, there's no way he'll say no to an omelette.

The kettle boils and Jason gets the frying pan going. Chopping up the ingredients, minus the eggs, is soothing work, and soon enough, good, warm smells are filling the air. Jason hums to himself as he gets the first omelette cooked, while also sipping at his tea, and so entirely misses Talon's approach until he's almost right beside him.

"Whoa, Jesus!" Putting a hand to his chest, Jason tries to stop the sudden thudding of his heart once he's noticed. "You are really fucking good at sneaking up on people."

Talon's eyes tellingly flick from him to the pan and back again. It's not hard to guess what had coaxed him out of his blanket pile. "I'm sorry," he says.

"It's fine," Jason replies, blinking when he belatedly realises he can actually see Talon's eyes. Thanks to the blind he pulled across the window last night, the light must be just dim enough in here now to be tolerable for him. "Just y'know, say something next time. Could've flipped this whole thing onto the floor." He swallows and needlessly tilts his head towards the pan. "You ready for breakfast?"

Talon nods.

"Cool. You like tea?"

That one gets a little more hesitation. "I don't know."

"I guess we'll find out." Jason says, while squashing down another hapless spike of anger inside his chest. Plenty of people have never tasted tea in their lives (Jason didn't until he was sixteen), and they live in a country where most prefer coffee, so that admittance doesn't necessarily mean anything bad.

Except that, so far, everything Talon's said about his life and time with the Court has been terrible, so...

Jason makes Talon a cup of tea, brewing it weak and dumping in a spoonful of sugar, just to increase the odds he'll enjoy it, then nods at him to go sit back down. "You can have this one, I'll bring it over to you."

While Talon eats and — yes, drinks the tea without apparent revulsion — Jason cooks himself up a second omelette, then goes down to sit on the other end of the couch with him. He doesn't talk while they're eating, just lets the food and the moment be enjoyed, until finally both their plates and their cups are empty and conversation can no longer

be avoided.

“So, uh, you sleep all right last night?”

It's a hell of a lame way to begin, and Jason winces at himself for it. Talon doesn't look bothered, though, just puzzled, as always, that this alongside every other concern about his welfare is something Jason considers worth asking him.

“Yes.” He answers.

“Good. That's good.” He fumbles, worse than a teenage boy trying to ask out his prom date. “So I figure we should carry on our talk from last night. If you're up for it now, that is.”

He can see the line of Talon's shoulders spike up slightly, though even with the sunglasses off, his face is no more expressive now than it was last night. “Okay.”

Jason frowns, but doesn't call him out on it. “I guess the first thing I need to ask is, what do you want from me?”

Talon blinks, and Jason wonders if there's some kind of awful word association going on in his brain when the first term he can think to describe the action with is ‘owlish’. “What do I want?”

“Yes,” he encourages. “What do you want. You came here because you told me you didn't know what else to do or where to go, and I want to help you, but I can't do that without some kind of idea of what it is you want yourself.”

It's not like he can just hand Talon a twenty dollar bill and point him towards the nearest homeless shelter in the city, after all. His appearance, his history — the fact there's still someone potentially after him — makes that, if not an impossibility, at least complicated. He doesn't think Talon would do well in such a place.

Talon looks down, brow wrinkling. The clothes he's wearing of Jason's, a faded band t-shirt and sweatpants, only serve to make him look smaller, despite the fact that there's just a couple inches height difference between them. “I don't know.”

It's not the answer Jason was hoping for. “You must have some idea.” he tries to encourage. “What else was running through your head when you made the decision to come here?”

Talon's fingers wind into one of the blankets he'd been sleeping under. "That I was cold," he says. "And hungry. That I didn't want to get caught like the others. You were kind to me."

Jason's fingers suddenly itch for a cigarette. "Have you been living on the streets all this time?"

"No." He has a brief moment of relief before Talon continues, "I know a lot of abandoned buildings around the city. I was staying in those."

"Fuck." Jason closes his eyes for a moment. "You could've come here sooner, you know."

Talon shakes his head. "I had to be sure first."

"Sure of what?"

"That the Court really is gone. If I miscalculated and someone did come for me, they'd kill you."

"Kill me?" Jason echoes. "Why? I'm not a threat. I'm just a glorified bartender. Why would they kill me?"

Talon shakes his head. "You know I exist. That would be reason enough for them. It's why I didn't tell them about you when I went back."

"Jesus," Jason hisses between his teeth. "Well, I guess a secret organisation doesn't stay very secret by allowing witnesses." Which begs the question of how the hell the nursery rhyme ever came into existence. The bastards probably planted it into the public consciousness themselves, just for their own amusement.

"No," Talon says lowly, "They don't."

Jason wonders how many people he's been forced to kill just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time before the Court was dismantled by whoever Talon was hiding from. It's disturbing to know he could easily have been one of them himself, had Talon not withheld the information of their meeting from his masters, or this target of his hadn't taken down the Court first.

This goddamn city.

He rubs his head, wanting that cigarette more, but knowing he should stay focused on getting through this first. "Okay, shelter and food."

That's something I can do, pretty easy. At least while you figure the rest of it out." He taps his fingers to try and help with the urge. "I know you said you've been with the Court since you were eleven but... I mean, is there maybe some family out there you could contact?"

"I haven't been with them since I was eleven. I've killed for them since I was eleven." Talon answers. He has his gaze focused intently on his knees. "I've been with them since I was nine."

"Wha—*nine*?"

Talon nods. "They took me after my parents died. I have no other family."

It just keeps getting worse and worse. "Fuck man, I'm sorry."

He blinks. "Why?"

"I just... I lost my parents when I was a kid, too. I know what that part's like, at least, if not all the other stuff." What were the two years between the Court taking him and Talon starting to kill for them? Training? Jason can't picture it. Can't imagine being that young and going through that. He'd thought he'd had it rough with his life, but this...

The remarkable thing is how calm and collected Talon seems about his past as he tells Jason about it. Or maybe that's not the right term. Resigned is more fitting. Beaten down. Which, after fourteen years of what sounds more and more to Jason like enslavement, makes sense. Anyone would be beaten down by that.

Talon's jaw tightens, before his face smooths back out into perfect blankness. "It's fine," he says, voice monotone. "I don't think about them anymore."

Jason doubts that's true, but he also knows a red flag when he sees one. Fair enough, he doesn't like to think about his parents either. There's too much grief that comes with them. Too much rage for the things he can't change. The things that should never have been his to endure in the first place.

"Right, well," He taps his fingers against his thigh, before changing the subject. "Like I said, we can figure the rest out later, once you're more settled in."

Talon raises his head a little. "I can keep staying here?"

It didn't occur to Jason earlier, when he said food and shelter was something he could provide, that Talon might take it to mean elsewhere other than here.

"This is the only place I got," he answers. "So as long as you don't mind sleeping on the couch and don't make a mess, I won't kick you out."

"No," Talon immediately says. "I don't. I won't."

Jason smiles a little. The swiftness of Talon's reply says everything his expression doesn't.

"Okay, that's settled then." Jason sucks his teeth for a moment, still fighting the urge for a cigarette. "So, next question, and I acknowledge this one I probably should have asked you way the fuck before now," But sue him, he had other concerns first. "Who exactly is this guy you were supposed to kill? The one who took down the Court."

And just like that, the air in the room changes again. From almost relaxed to something bright and tense. Talon doesn't move, exactly, but there's something different about his posture that makes Jason think of a statue. The potential of movement, perfectly captured in stone.

"He's no threat to you." Talon says.

Jason frowns. "How can you be sure of that?"

"He only hurts bad people."

If Talon expects that to reassure Jason, he's forgotten which city they're living in. Just because he has a compassionate streak a mile wide doesn't mean he's stupid, and with a slow grinding of figurative metal, the gears in Jason's head start to turn as he lines that statement up with every other detail Talon's let slip about the cause of the Court of Owl's downfall.

Someone dangerous enough not just to fight an assassin trained since childhood to a standstill, but send him running. Someone with allies. Someone who only hurts bad people.

"I need a name, Talon," he says, while praying that his voice remains steadier than he thinks it is. "I know you don't want to tell me,

probably because of how you think I'll react, but I need to know if you're going to be staying here with me."

Talon regards him for a good thirty seconds after he says it, and during them, Jason wonders if he's made a mistake and they've reached some kind of breaking point. If Talon will consider this one price not worth paying for his help.

But finally, he bows his head and utters one of the last names Jason wants to hear in this situation.

"Batman."

Fuck.

Fuck.

Jason inhales sharply. Too sharply, for Talon not to notice.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asks.

"No." Jason answers immediately. "No. It's just... It makes sense. Shit, it makes a lot of sense." Except... "But Batman's operating in the city for years, why did the Court only want him dead now?"

"I don't know."

"They didn't tell you?" Jason asks, incredulously.

Talon shakes his head. "A weapon doesn't need to know why it's being fired. Only to hit its target."

That may very well be true for a gun, Jason thinks, as it's just a hunk of metal with no feelings, but Talon is a person. A living, breathing person. Except that it's clearer than ever the Court didn't see him that way, and the words he just spoke reek of being repeated from what someone else told him. Multiple times, most likely, until eventually he internalised it deeply enough to believe them.

"You're not a weapon, Talon." he says.

Talon doesn't answer him. Probably doesn't believe him, but Jason's not surprised by that. One person telling him different isn't going to undo the work the Court did on Talon over a decade (and for a moment Jason shivers at the echo of his father's voice in his ear, calling him useless and good for nothing, as well other, worse things).

Standing up from the couch, Jason crosses over to where he hung his jacket next to the door last night, and digs his cigarettes and lighter out of the pocket. Normally, he'd only over smoke by the window, but this time he can't wait. Plus, he doesn't want anyone overhearing them should their voices carry too well outside.

Batman, he thinks, remembering the weight of a tyre iron in his hands, the pinch of fingers around his ear. *Batman*. It's not the worst answer Talon could have gave him, but it's definitely not the best either.

"All right," he mutters, after the nicotine's hit his veins and soothed the hackles on his neck back down. "All right, we can deal with this. I can deal with this." He turns back round, looking at Talon, who is still watching him like a hawk from his position on the couch. "He doesn't know where you are, right? All we need to do is keep it that way."

Talon cocks his head, an aura of confusion inherent with the action. "I don't understand."

"What's not to understand?"

"Batman is..." Talon strokes a finger over his kneecap. "If you let me stay here, he might think you're helping me."

"I am helping you." Jason replies, hotly, and regrets his tone a moment later when Talon flinches back.

"Not like that. Like you're one of them. Part of the Court."

He forces himself to breathe and let the smoke settle more of his nerves. Snapping at Talon isn't going to help anything.

"I'm not scared of Batman," is what he says, eventually. "Most people are, but I'm not. And just because he's a hero to the city, doesn't mean he knows what's best for it or for the people who live here." Jason walks back to the couch as the ash on his cigarette threatens to crumble onto the floor. "Doesn't mean me helping you is the wrong thing either. I haven't known you long, but my gut tells me you're not a bad person, T. You may have been forced to be one by the Court, but that's not who you are at heart, otherwise you would've just killed me the night you met me. You deserve a chance to move past that by yourself, not just get locked up in Arkham for it."

Picking up his cup from the coffee table, Jason taps the ash from the cigarette into the bottom, where it mixes in with what's left of his tea

to form a sad, grey sludge. Jason spends the next few seconds staring determinedly at it while he waits for Talon to reply.

“You talk like you know him.” he finally says.

“I don’t.” Jason says, and it’s only partly a lie. “I’ve just lived in Gotham all my life. I’ve seen the effect Batman has on it, and I know his way isn’t always the right one.”

Talon shakes his head slowly, a motion Jason only just picks up on from the periphery of his vision. “I don’t deserve this.” he says, a touch hoarsely.

“Well, too bad, you’re getting it.”

“I have nothing to pay you back with.”

“You don’t need to pay me back.” Jason replies, putting the cup down and sitting with him once again. He has to duck forward slightly to look Talon in the eye, but once he makes contact, he doesn’t let him look away again. “Just figure out what you want. That’s the only thing I’m asking of you.”

Talon visibly struggles with looking him so directly in the face, but eventually he nods. “I’ll try.”

‘I’ll try’ is better than nothing. Jason leans back again. “Good. Then... shit, I don’t know what else. I guess that’s all there is to talk about.” For now, anyway. Hearing that it’s Batman on Talon’s tail has thrown him for as much of a loop as learning the Court of Owls was real did.

Except... no, there is one more thing.

“Batman doesn’t kill people.” Jason says, frowning at Talon. “When you said the Court is gone, did you mean dead or arrested?”

Talon’s throat bobs as he swallows, and Jason’s eyes dart down to watch it — the dance of his smooth, brown skin — for a moment before looking up into his face again. “Some were arrested. The others I think fled.”

Arrested. Fled. In this city, neither of those things hold any permanence.

Shit, this just got even more complicated than he first thought, and unlike with Batman, Jason knows he actually does have something to

fear should any members of the Court of Owls someday return to look for their lost Talon. But it's still not enough to make him change his mind. Especially when he can see Talon watching him, weary and expectant of it, like he knows he's not worth fighting for.

Well, screw that.

Jason extinguishes his cigarette in his cup, before picking both it and their plates up from the table. "I'm going to do the dishes," he announces, "After that, we'll sit down and figure out what stuff you're going to need while you're here."

"What stuff I'll need?" Talon repeats blankly, obviously wrong-footed by the sudden change in topic.

"Yeah. I don't mind you borrowing my clothes if you have to, but I draw the line at sharing a toothbrush." He starts the water running to rinse the plates off first. "Lucky for you, it's grocery shopping day in the Jason Todd household."

Out of the corner of his eye, he's aware of Talon standing up and walking over to him from the couch, looking all the more small and even dainty in clothes that are just slightly too large for him. "I can do that for you." he says, looking down at the sink.

Jason thinks for a moment, trying to judge exactly where the offer's coming from, then shakes his head. "How about I wash, you dry?" is his compromise.

Talon doesn't even hesitate before nodding.

Jason directs him to the drawer where he keeps his dish towels, then picks up the sponge to start scrubbing, probably with more force than is strictly necessary, considering everything he's learned. But he's set his course now, there is no turning back, at least not so long as Talon wants to stay with him.

Whatever it takes to do so, he's going to make this work.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next few days are an adjustment, for both of them. Jason isn't used to living with someone, especially a formerly enslaved meta, and Talon... Talon doesn't seem to be used to any part of what he would call normal living, full stop.

When Jason goes to the store to get groceries, he comes back to find Talon in the exact same position he left him sitting in, having moved not so much as a finger out of place. It takes time and a lot of reassurance to make him understand that he really is okay to roam the apartment without Jason being there, just so long as he stays out of Jason's room, and that he's free to read from the bookshelf or turn on the TV if he's bored. The same goes for doing other basic things like eating and drinking, as well as taking a shower.

"I'm not going to punish you for looking after yourself, you know." Jason says to him, during one of their late night sit-downs after he comes home from work and finds Talon studiously sitting on the couch waiting for him again. "Hell, I wouldn't punish you even if you did do something wrong, which getting yourself something to eat or drink definitely isn't. I don't do that kind of shit. You're allowed to look after yourself in any way you need to without asking my permission first, T."

Talon looks up at him from the bowl of dollar store ramen Jason just made for him, a stray noodle hanging out of the corner of his mouth before he slurps it up. "I know."

"Do you?" Jason asks, frowning. "Because the amount of times I'm coming home to find you've not eaten anything the entire time I've been gone is starting to get real concerning to me."

"I know." Talon repeats, eyes quickly skittering away from him again. "It's just... hard."

A twinge of guilt fills Jason for having caused that reaction. But at the same time, he feels like he has to be at least a little firm to get his message across. "They were really that strict?"

"Stricter." Talon slurps the noodle up into his mouth, then wipes the

leftover streak of broth on his chin away. "I only ate when they said I could eat, and only what they prepared for me. I've never even made my own meals before."

Jason sips his water, considering that. "What did you do during the week you were on the run, then?"

"Stole, mostly."

He raises his eyebrows. "So wait, stealing food is okay, but helping yourself to what I have in the cupboard isn't?"

Talon twitches uncomfortably. "The food here is yours." is what he says.

Jason takes an equally uncomfortable moment to process that. "And you're staying here, and you don't want to risk pissing me off. People outside can't hurt you, but I..." He puts his own bowl down before pressing his hand against his forehead. Too many flashes of his dad come up, voice angry and fist raised when he decided Jason had taken something he shouldn't have. It hurts him immensely to think Talon might be thinking of him that same way, even if it's out of internalised behaviour rather than direct association.

"I'm not them, T." His voice comes out a little hoarse when he says it. "I'll never be like them, either. I'm not going to hurt you or kick you out. Not unless you try to hurt me first. I..." He swallows, aware of Talon's too sharp eyes watching him. "I know what that's like too well to ever do it to someone else."

"You do?" Talon's voice is soft, but Jason isn't ready to share that part of his history yet. He just nods.

"Yeah."

Talon is silent for a moment, during which Jason finds himself examining the handsome lines of his face. The way his lips, soft and pink, purse when he thinks.

"I'll do better." he says.

A sharp burst of shame hits Jason in the gut when he realises he's been looking. "Thank you," he quickly answers, struggling to hide it. "And you know, if you don't know how to cook for yourself, I'd be happy to teach you."

As always, Talon looks surprised at being thanked. But this time it's followed a flash of intrigue and want. "I'd like that."

"Cool. Awesome." Jason agrees, still feeling off-balanced. "That's a deal then. My next day off, we're having cooking lessons."

And so, a couple nights later, they do. Nothing fancy or complicated to start with, but cooking nonetheless. Jason enjoys teaching Talon, who is attentive to everything he has to say, and asks questions only when necessary. He learns quickly too, and by the end of just that first lesson, Jason feels confident that he can trust him to feed himself a decent — if basic — meal without him, though he still makes sure to buy plenty of snacks and put microwave meals in his fridge that need no further preparation, just in case.

It seems to work, as over the course of the next week, Jason comes home to more and more evidence that Talon is heeding his words. Missing packets, fuller trash, and freshly washed dishes on the side of the sink. Slow progress, but progress nonetheless. He also seems to take to heart Jason's message that he can make use of the TV and bookshelf, as more often than not Jason now opens the door to find him watching the former avidly through his sunglasses.

"Cartoons?" he asks, flopping down beside Talon the first night this happens with interest.

"I like them." Talon answers, glancing sideways at Jason like he's searching for disapproval and is relieved when he finds none. "I remember watching them when I was younger."

"Yeah, me too." At least until they had to sell the TV to make rent. "I don't mind. It's nice to come home to something you can switch your brain off on." And to a not empty apartment, as well. He's finding that out more and more.

"Switch your brain off?" Talon repeats, quizzically.

"Uh huh," Jason waves his hand at the TV, where two bright, colourful characters are involved in a slapstick fuelled chase. "Something that's... easy, I guess. Distracting. You don't have to think about it a lot to enjoy it." Which after a night at the bar, he definitely needs sometimes.

Talon's head turns back to the screen as he considers that, then nods.

Jason wonders how it must be for him, watching through the

sunglasses. How his eyes can be so sensitive that even the light from a TV makes them hurt. “You know, I could dim the screen for you, if you want. Save you having to wear those things all the time.”

Talon frowns, “If you do that, you won’t be able to see.”

“My eyesight’s not that bad, T.” Jason says, finding the concern sweetly charming. He already keeps the main lights off for him, dimming the TV screen isn’t that much more of a stretch. Though he is going to have to find some kind of happy medium for the situation sooner or later, before he really does end up with eye strain. “And right now, you’re using it far more than me.”

Not that he ever uses it much anyway. Having a TV is mostly a comfort thing for him. A sign that he’s well off enough now to afford this most basic of luxuries, rather than something to be enjoyed for its intended purpose.

Talon chews his lip, another thing Jason has started to notice him doing of late. “Okay.”

With one hand, Jason picks up the remote and thumbs through the buttons until he finds the right one to adjust the TV’s brightness. After which Talon removes his sunglasses, blinking a moment while his vision readjusts. “Thank you.”

“It’s no big,” Jason shrugs, sinking back into the couch with a worn out sigh. God, he’s tired tonight. “So what else did you like to do when you were younger?”

Talon’s shoulders stiffen at the question, and the sideways glance he gives Jason is right back to being wary again.

Quickly, he holds up his hands. “Hey, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want. Just thought it might help you to talk about it.”

“I...” Talon’s fingers pick at one of the blankets that make up his bed here. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you want to talk about it or you don’t know what else you used to like?”

“I don’t know if I *can* talk about it.” Talon clarifies, back to staring ahead of him. “I haven’t... not in years.”

“Because they wouldn’t let you?”

“The past is meaningless,” Talon intones, “The Talon of the Court of Owls has no use of sentiment.”

Jason doesn’t mean to snort, but he does. “What a load of bullshit. They didn’t want someone with feelings, they should have got a machine to do their dirty work, not kidnapped a kid.”

Talon smiles slightly. One of those small, secret smiles Jason is learning to spot with increasing accuracy. “I think they would have, if they’d had the technology.”

And isn’t that a terrifying thought.

“Well, if you ever decide you can and do want to talk about it I’ll be here to listen.” Jason affirms, before another thought strikes him. “Hey, T.”

The smile is gone as Talon looks at him. “Yes, Jason?”

“You weren’t always Talon. Before the Court got hold of you, you must have had another name, right?”

Talon stares at him, the look in his eyes hard and intense, until Jason feels the hair on the back of his neck start to rise and his skin crawl. “I did.”

“I was just, uh, thinking, you’re not the Court’s Talon anymore. So if you wanted to, you could go back to using—”

“Talon is fine.” the answer comes sharply, before he can even finish making the suggestion. Jason winces.

“Sorry.” seems the right thing to say, so he says it. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have... I just wanted you to know it’s an option. That’s all. Whatever you want to do is fine.”

Talon doesn’t say anything, just turns his head back to the TV, and Jason winces again, knowing that he’s obviously stepped on a nerve. It reminds him again that he’s out of his depth on this, dealing with someone who has as many levels of trauma as Talon does. It probably won’t be the last time he puts a foot wrong in trying to help him.

Sighing internally, he also turns his attention back to the cartoons they’re watching, reminding himself of what he had said when he first sat down. That they’re something easy to watch, distracting. Something you can switch your brain off to, and not have to think.

Maybe that's what Talon needs most right now, rather than probing conversations.

Eventually, he finds himself drifting. His head starts to nod and he yawns.

"You're tired." Talon observes.

Jason blinks his eyes back open at him. "Uh, yeah. Been kind of a long night. Lot of assholes to deal with."

"Assholes?"

He smiles thinly, shrugging. "I work at a bar, T. Men come in, they get drunk. Then some of them think it's a good idea to start fights or harass women. Being the manager means I gotta deal with that."

Talon thins his lips. "They don't hurt you, do they?"

"Nah, not usually. I'm big enough now that most of them back off as soon as I give them a look, but sometimes..." He rubs his face, before forcing himself to sit up. "I should go to bed."

"But you haven't eaten." Talon says, and Jason again finds himself touched by the confused thread of concern in his voice, even as he waves it off.

"It's fine, I'm not really hungry." Getting to his feet, he first stretches then cracks his back. "Good night, T."

"Good night."

Two days later, Jason comes home from work to find a plate of food waiting on the counter ready for him. It's nothing much, just noodles and hot dogs, the latter slightly burnt somehow, and the former swamped in watery broth. But food, nonetheless.

"Did you make this for me?" Jason asks Talon stupidly, because who the hell else would have done it, the dinner fairy?

Talon, watching him like the aloof cat Jason had first thought him to be from his current perch on the windowsill, nods. "You said I need to

eat. You need to eat, too.”

“I...” he feels slightly lost for words looking at the plate. “Um, yeah, I did say that.” He just hadn’t expected this to be a result of it.

“Is it okay?” Talon asks, and Jason looks up again to see him now watching him with a touch of nervousness in his face.

Shit. “Yeah,” he says, “Yeah, of course it is.” Jason picks up the plate and spears one of the hot dogs with the fork left on it, before taking an overly enthusiastic bite. Not only are the hot dogs burnt, he quickly finds, but they’re also mostly cold as well. It must have been at least twenty minutes since Talon took them out of the pan. “It’s good. Thank you, wow. No one’s made me dinner since... jeez, I don’t know. A long time.”

He feels thoroughly unconvincing in showing his appreciation, but Talon seems to relax anyway. “They haven’t?”

Jason takes another bite, reflecting that cold hot dog isn’t too bad. Better, at least, than the noodles are going to be. “Yeah. I’ve lived on my own pretty much since I was ten. Aside from visiting soup kitchens and eating out at diners, I’ve always cooked for myself.”

“Since you were ten?”

Jason freezes, then chews and swallows hard, realising he’s given something away he didn’t mean to. Something close, personal. Painful. “I, um, yeah. I told you I lost my parents when I was young. Well, I was real young, as a matter of fact. Didn’t want to go into the foster care system, so I did what I had to.” He gestures at the apartment around them. “Worked out pretty well, for the most part.”

Talon is giving him that look again. The one that makes Jason feel like he’s being dissected. Like the other man can see right through him. “That must have been hard.”

No harder than what you went through, he almost says, while pushing back on some of the stomach churning memories that want to rise up out of him.

“It was,” he answers instead, “But I survived it.”

Talon unfolds himself from the windowsill and slowly walks over to him, which to be honest eases the parts of Jason that are still hyper aware that Batman is after him.

“I can keep doing this for you,” he says, once he’s close, indicating the plate Jason’s holding. “I want to... I want to do something. For you. You’ve done a lot for me, so I...” He drops his arm back to his side. “I’d like to.”

Jason blinks at him, savouring the taste of charred hot dog on his tongue. “You would?”

Talon nods at him, the movement sharp and abrupt. Jason feels another burst of warmth blaze to life inside his chest, unfamiliar and close to uncomfortable. The realisation that he’s becoming attached also accompanies it, though he tables that particular feeling for deeper examination another time.

“Well, so long as it is a want,” he answers, carefully. “That would be... that would be great actually, T. Thank you.”

It won’t hurt, he thinks, to allow this. Talon’s clearly someone who’s used to being occupied, or at the very least directed. If he wants to take on a task in the apartment by his own will, so be it — though Jason tells himself to keep an eye out just to make sure it doesn’t threaten to turn into an obligation later on.

Talon looks quietly satisfied at the verdict, and Jason smiles himself as he takes another bite of food before wincing.

They’re definitely going to have to work more on Talon’s cooking skills.

Talon is never going to be a good cook. Jason discovers that quickly, despite his best efforts to teach him otherwise.

It’s not that he doesn’t want to learn, or that he doesn’t listen or try his best. There’s just something about him, Jason thinks, that’s too rigid and stuck to following rules. And then when those rules don’t work the way they’re supposed to, he overcompensates, leaving things too long or not long enough in a determined bid to get it right. Being a good cook means being able to follow your instincts, shifting and adapting in a way Talon clearly can’t, at least in this context. Which is a shame, because he really does try hard, as the progression of slightly burnt, slightly underdone, or occasionally perfect meals Jason eats

over the course of the next couple weeks attests.

Luckily, he grew up eating much worse fare than even Talon's poorest efforts can concoct, and the pleasure of coming home to a prepared meal does wonders to get rid of even the bitterest aftertaste.

He never realised before how much he missed it. Or, failing to actually remember the last time his mother had cooked for him when he was small, how much he's always longed for something like this. Not just the meals but... not being alone. And the crazy thing is, before Talon came along, he'd never *felt* lonely in his apartment. Never recognised it as a conscious thing. But now, as they adjust more and more to living with each other, he can't help but wonder if he was. If he always has been, for many years now, with no real friends and definitely no family. It's always just been him, and that was fine. Is fine. Only...

Only with Talon here now, he finds himself failing to miss the feeling of solitude he once relished as a harbour of safety. Which is revealing, but also worrying. Eventually, he thinks, Talon is going to find his feet and want to leave, and when he does, Jason is going to have to get used to being alone all over again. And...

And the more he thinks about it, the more he starts to realise he doesn't want to.

Otherwise, things progress slowly. Jason does his best to make sure Talon has all his basic needs fulfilled, but beyond that he's still at a loss on how to help him. He watches and listens to what Talon says, and tries to prod him as much as he can without provoking an adverse reaction into giving up more information about his past before the Court. In this, he's rarely successful, though. Talon is tightlipped and guarded about almost everything. At least until, one night when they're sat down watching TV together, a curious thing happens.

Aside from cartoons, Talon has also started to show an appreciation for what Jason can only call 'cheesy' content. Movies and shows, mainly focused on action, that go over the top in every way. It's impossible to take them seriously, and after a while of watching him watch them, Jason realises that might actually be the appeal for Talon. It's easy to watch silly people having silly adventures that always turn out all right in the end. Or at least, easier than involving yourself with anything more serious.

It's similar to the reason why Jason can read the works of Jane Austen

over and over again when he's feeling low, surrounding himself in the comfort of familiar words he knows can't hurt him. Only television is much more unpredictable than a book in that sense. For one thing, books don't have adverts.

Jason is yawning when it happens. Stretched out with his legs beneath the coffee table and slowly trying to convince himself it's past time he went to bed. On the television, a bright commercial for toothpaste filled with smiling people flashes on screen, then one for a sports car, home insurance, half a dozen other, equally annoying products, before finally switching over into a tourism call for Las Vegas. The casinos, restaurants and, last of all, the Cirque du Soleil.

Working in a bar, Jason knows the sound of glass shattering intimately. But that doesn't stop him from jolting straight up when it happens, looking in horror at where Talon's hand is now dripping water and blood onto the floor. Not that he himself seems to have noticed what he's done. His tawny eyes are still focused straight ahead of him, where on the screen colourfully costumed clowns and trapeze artists cavort.

"Holy shit, T!" he exclaims, scrambling to get over to him. "Are you all right?"

Talon doesn't answer him, and unthinkingly Jason goes to take hold of his hand. Only to regret it when the touch startles Talon back to life and his uninjured hand whips up to strike Jason in the face as he yanks the injured one away. It's more of a slap than a punch, but Talon hooked his fingers as he did it, like he expected claws to be at the end of them, and God damn it, even the blunt edges of his nails hurt.

"Fuck!" he hisses, falling backing away from him. Jason brings his hand up, clamping it over the sting Talon left behind, only to startle again a moment later when he realises his fingers are wet, because it's the same hand with which he tried to stem Talon's bleeding.

"I..." Talon is up on his feet now, his eyes wide and lost and *hurt*. Then scared and horrified. "I'm sorry. I..."

Without another word, he turns and bolts for the window.

Jason catapults himself off the couch after him a second later.

It's harder for him to squeeze himself through the window than it is for Talon. He's bigger, taller, more cumbersome and far less graceful.

Jason hisses as he bangs his knee on the sill and his head on the frame at the same time before tumbling out onto the fire escape, just quick enough to see the dark shape scrambling onto the roof above. “T, wait!” he shouts, “Don’t run away!”

The rusted steps creak under his weight as he runs up them, gripping the rail on the side to help him keep his balance. It’s not raining tonight, thankfully, but it is still bitterly cold. Enough so that ice has coated much of the metal. Jason slips once, near the top, but ultimately makes it onto the roof unharmed.

There he looks up, panting slightly, with the fear it will be empty and Talon will be gone. He isn’t, though. He’s just standing at the other side of it with his back turned to Jason as he looks out over the Bowery towards the Upper East Side.

“T,” Jason says, shivering reflexively as the wind catches him, “T. Hey man, you okay?”

He doesn’t approach all the way, stopping a few feet behind Talon just in case. He can see the man’s head is bowed, his shoulders sunk, and even though he wears clothes that fit now, he still looks small and fragile because of it.

“T?”

Talon doesn’t look back at him. “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“Oh that?” Jason touches his cheek, wincing a little where it can’t be seen. “Pshh, that was nothing. Barely even felt it.”

Now Talon looks, and his expression is unconvinced. “I could have killed you.”

“From a scratch? Not really, unless there’s something else you’ve not told me about your powers.” Jason steps closer, up to the edge of the roof beside him. “I should be the one apologising anyway. For grabbing at you like that. I just saw your hand bleeding, and well...”

Talon lifts it. What cuts were there have already closed, leaving nothing but blood stains behind.

Jason winces. “Yeah, I forgot about that.”

“If I’d had my claws on, or a knife...” Talon starts to say.

"You didn't," Jason answers him seriously. "You didn't and I'm fine. The only thing I'm worried about is you. What happened in there?"

Talon looks back over the city, then folds his arms across his chest. "It doesn't matter."

"Seemed to upset you plenty," Jason says, "That makes it matter to me. Was it something you saw on the TV?"

"I..." Talon closes his eyes, then sighs. "That advert, it..."

Jason waits, trying not to push him too hard, even though his curiosity over the incident is strong.

"I was born in a circus." Talon finally says, "My parents were trapeze artists. They called them — us — the Flying Graysons. I used to perform with them, before they were murdered."

Jason blinks. Out of all things, he hadn't expected that. But at the same time, something rings familiar in the back of his head. The name 'Grayson' stamped in bold black headlines.

"I think I heard about that," he says, brow wrinkling as he follows Talon's gaze over the rooftops. "It was in the news. They died while performing, and their son..." He swallows. "Their son disappeared."

"Yes," Talon says, bitterly, "I disappeared."

"Shit," Jason puts his hand over his mouth for a moment. "I'm sorry, T. I..."

"I try not to think about it. They used to punish me for talking about it. Arguing about it." Talon tightens his arms around himself. "I did a lot, at first, before I learned."

"Well," Jason struggles for words. "They're not here now. You can talk about it, if you want to."

He shakes his head. "I told you before, I'm not sure I know how anymore."

Jason understands, and it must be some swing of that understanding, some madness, that drives him then to say, "My dad was a criminal. Just a low-life thug, nothing fancy or important. He'd come home bragging when things went right, or swinging his fists at me and my mom when it didn't. Then one day he just up and disappeared. Don't

know what happened to him, if he finally pissed off the wrong person or fell into a river drunk, but the important thing is he didn't come back."

From the corner of his eye, Jason sees Talon's hand lift up for a moment in what seems to be a swiftly aborted impulse to reach out to him, before it snaps back down to his side.

An odd sort of thrill runs through his chest even as he's grateful it didn't actually connect, before Talon swallows and, in slower and more hesitant tones, replies, "My dad... he was good. I remember... good and... kind. He smiled a lot. Made bad jokes. His aftershave smelled like sandalwood. I'd pretend to choke on it when he used too much."

Jason finds himself smiling, even as his heart breaks a little. "What about your mom?"

"She was..." Talon pauses, and again Jason waits, even as the seconds stretch out almost into a minute. "Beautiful, and warm and strong. My earliest memory is her holding me up in the rigging. It was so high, but I wasn't afraid at all. She used to call me..." He pauses, licks his lips. "She used to call me her robin."

"Robin?" Jason repeats, unable to help the typical Gothamite reaction to hearing that name.

"Because..." Talon scuffs his foot on the edge of the roof. "I was born on the first day of spring."

Jason blinks, automatically filing that information away for later. "Really? That's cool."

Talon shrugs, a barely perceptible movement. Then, reminding Jason that he started this as a quid pro quo situation, says, "What about your mother?"

Jason's insides twist. Talking about his father is one thing, but his mother... "She was nice. Pretty. But... frail. She didn't cope well with the life we had; with my dad. She got sick after he disappeared and never recovered."

It's not a lie, not totally. Jason doesn't like to tell people the truth about his mother. Not because he's ashamed of the truth, but because he never wants people to think badly of her, and he knows they will. He knows the moment people hear the word 'drugs' all their

compassion dies. They won't care about why she took them, the life that was so cruel to her, and the dealers who took advantage of her pain and addiction to make a sale. Her death won't be a tragedy to them, the way it is to him, it will simply be 'her fault'. Catherine deserved better than that. She *still* deserves better than that.

"Oh." Talon says softly.

"Yeah," Jason chews his lip, "So now you know my life story, too. Puts us on equal footing, don't you think?"

Talon's lips half-quirk again, then he looks down. "Something like that." Jason hears him take a deep breath, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For coming after me. Sharing that. It... it made it easier."

Jason nods sharply. "Thanks for sharing back. Still mean what I said at the start of this, I'm not going to kick you out, T. Not for something that isn't your fault, and that wasn't. You saw something that upset you and you lashed out. Now that I know what it was, I can help you avoid it again in the future. Or talk about it more, if you need it. I'm still committed to helping you figure yourself out, y'know. In any way you need me to."

"I know."

Jason looks back at the city, then frowns as something else nudges at the back of his mind. Another memory of his own, which somehow he'd forgotten about until now. "Hey, T?"

"Yes, Jason?"

"What was the name of it? The circus you were in?"

Talon's fingers clench at his sides for a moment, then unwind. "Haly's."

"Ha, you know... I think I went to watch one of their shows when I was younger. It was one of the few good things my dad ever did for me. Not that he paid for our tickets, of course. But I think I actually... I think I actually saw your family perform."

It's coming back to him now. The smell of popcorn in the air, the cheers and claps of the people around him. His dad, stinking of

tobacco and stale sweat, but laughing and slinging his arm around Jason's shoulders like they were a normal father and son. And above them, three people, flying through the air like birds.

"Your outfits were blue, right?" he asks.

"With yellow fringes. And..." Talon's golden eyes are staring straight at him now. "And a sash."

"Yeah!" God, how could he have forgotten that? The sense of wonder he'd felt as a child filters back to him now that he's an adult, faded but still strong. Jason looks back at Talon, and with perfect honesty says, "You guys were amazing. Especially you. I thought you were the coolest kid ever when I saw you there."

It does something to him, Jason can tell, as Talon blinks rapidly, then actually lifts his hand over his mouth to cover what is either a smile or grimace. "Yes," he whispers, "We were."

Jason smiles sadly, then reaches out his own hand towards him. "Come on, it's freezing up here. We should go back inside now. You want some hot cocoa before bed?"

Talon looks at it for a long moment before nodding, and when he actually puts his hand in Jason's, his fingers feel like ice. "Yes, I do."

Jason's skin tingles pleasantly around them. "All right, then. Cool."

But on the way back down, Talon stops him before he can actually step onto the fire escape. "Jason,"

"Yeah?"

"My mom didn't just call me robin."

Jason holds his breath. "What else did she call you?"

"Richard. Dick. That's my name. My real name."

"Dick," Jason repeats, and he swears he feels Talon's fingers tighten around his as he says it. It's an old-fashioned name for sure, not one many people would choose to go by now, but circus people are different, he supposes. "Dick. Right, okay. Is that, um, is that what you want me to call you now?"

Talon's eyes shy away from him again as Jason looks back. "No... not... not now. That name, it's not me anymore. But..." He swallows,

“I still wanted you to know.”

Jason nods understandingly, then gently squeezes his hand back, hyper-aware of the importance of what he’s been given. “Okay. Then come on, T, let’s get down off this roof before Batman spots us.”

They don’t need any more excitement tonight.

It’s like he opened a floodgate, as more information starts to come from Talon after that. First in a trickle, then a steady flow.

He hears about how Talon learnt to fly on the trapeze almost before he could walk. How he spent his childhood prior to the Court almost constantly on the move, going from town to town, state to state. Even country to country. That he grew up among performers, surrounded by clowns and acrobats, strongmen, a fortune teller, and even a bearded lady. That his friends back then didn’t just include other children, but animals, too.

“An elephant?” Jason repeats, “Your best friend was an elephant?”

“Zitka,” Talon nods, smiling that subtle smile that is becoming more and more obvious every day, and does strange things to Jason’s stomach. “She was my babysitter, too. She would follow me around the camp and make sure I returned to my parents from the moment I learned how to crawl.”

“Shit,” Jason laughs, “And here I thought having a dog was the coolest pet ever.”

Not that he really remembers what happened to that dog. Or is even sure that he wants to.

In return, he also finds himself telling Talon more about himself as well. Stories of some of his escapades on the streets, how he got the job he has now, and other, safer tales from the bar as well. There are just three things he continues to hold back on: how his mother really died, the worst of what he did to survive as a teenager, and his own personal history with Batman. Those details of his life no one else ever needs to know but him.

And it seems to help. Help Talon, help him. Jason watches as he seems to settle more and more over the next month, becoming more comfortable and less hesitant. Less of the soldier the Court made him to be, and more the person Jason suspects was always carefully hidden underneath, buried under layers of dedicated subservience in order to survive.

He also grows more used to having him around. To preparing and washing two plates and two glasses at every meal instead of one. Doubling his weekly grocery shop and the loads of washing he takes down to his building's basement. He buys Talon more things than just the basics. Little treats here and there, that he thinks will please him, and encourage him to remember that he's not a slave anymore.

There are still bad days, of course. Days Talon retreats back from him into the colder persona he wore when they first met. Days where he wakes up from nightmares that scratch his throat raw and leave him sweating for hours after they end. Slowly, Jason learns to read the signs and adjust his behaviour accordingly, wary of the damage a badly handled episode could bring to the progress they've made so far.

It feels good. It feels comfortable, as much as it remains a challenge, and Jason finds himself thinking less of helping Talon to find his feet and his presence in his apartment as a temporary thing, and more as... well, just how it is now. How his life is. Talon is no longer simply a guest in his mind's eye, but instead a... a roommate, sharing equal duties around their home. As much as he can without raising the suspicions of Jason's neighbours or the building's super, anyway (an action mostly managed by Talon's quick reflexes whenever the man bothers to come to the door).

It's dangerous thinking, but he can't help it, and that's how it stays for them, until the night Jason comes back home from the bar one night with a black eye.

"What happened?!" Talon is in his face before Jason has time to react to it.

"I—" he starts, then winces as the motion makes the pain in his face pull that bit sharper. "Easy, T. It's nothing, just a bruise."

"Someone hit you." Talon says, pointedly, leaning up on his toes to get a better look at it.

With a bit of light nudging, Jason manages to get the door closed behind him again before anyone else can see. "Nah. A guy got in a

lucky shot, that's all."

"Why?"

"Because..." Jason sighs as he manages to skirt round him, heading towards his fridge. Talon immediately follows on his heels, as close and quiet as a shadow. "Look, it's not a big deal, okay?"

He doesn't really want to talk about it. Both because what happened has put him in a bad mood for the night and he doesn't want to worry Talon. But as he pulls out a bag of frozen sweetcorn from the freezer compartment and looks back at the other man, he can tell that's not going to be easy.

A couple weeks after Talon had moved in, Jason had gone out and purchased fairy lights, the kind that were normally put up around Christmas, to hang on his walls in order to provide softer lighting in the apartment that wouldn't hurt his new companion's eyes. It had turned out to be a good choice, one that worked out so that both of them can see what they're doing without aid, yet it does nothing now to soften the look on Talon's face. One of deep concern, and what Jason swiftly realises is simmering anger.

"You're hurt," Talon says, putting his fingers on his face, "Of course it's a big deal."

Jason starts again at the direct touch. He can count the amount of times Talon has initiated contact between them on one hand, and at least two of those occasions belong to when the man had threatened to kill him. "T..."

"What happened, Jason?"

He sighs, before lifting the sweetcorn up and pressing it over his eye. "One of the women that work at my bar, she's been dating this guy. Real asshole type. Me and the other staff there have been trying to help her dump him for weeks now, and she finally did it yesterday. Changed the locks on her place and everything. Only then he came storming into the bar today, demanding to talk with her."

Talon eyes narrow. "You said no."

"I said no, and he took offence to that." Jason grimaces as the cold starts to seep into his skin. "We had a few words about it. Don't worry, though, he came out looking a lot worse than me."

Of course, what he's not saying is that the guy also made a few claims regarding 'friends' of his he'll be bringing back tomorrow night to teach Jason a lesson. But again, he doesn't want Talon to worry, and Jason's had a lot worse threats made towards him in his lifetime. It was probably just showboating on the guy's behalf in an attempt to save face, anyway. Nothing worth actually worrying about.

Probably.

Talon doesn't look convinced, and his hand moves up higher to help press the bag over Jason's eye. "If you want me to, I could—"

"No!" Jason says instantly, wincing again. "No. I told you, it's fine. I already took care of it. You don't need to do that sort of thing anymore, remember?"

Talon scowls at him. "But he hurt you."

"He did," Jason acknowledges, "And he probably won't be the last person to, either. It's just one of the risks that come with the job, T. Especially since I don't have the budget to afford a bouncer."

"A bouncer?" Talon blinks.

"Yeah, someone to stop fights, and throw out anyone who causes trouble." Leaning back against the fridge, Jason adjust the bag over his eye. "Usually a base requirement in Gotham, but until I can get one, it's just me and my baseball bat."

Talon withdraws from him, considering. "I see."

Jason sighs again, knowing he hasn't convinced him, but what else can he do? He has to work and this is the job he has. He's not about to let Talon risk himself just because one asshole couldn't keep his fists to himself.

"Tell you what," he says, "If you haven't already made something, how about we get takeout and watch a movie tonight? I know a couple places that are still open."

Or more like never closed. Gotham is that kind of town.

Talon takes a step away from him, folding his arms across his chest. "You can't bribe me from worrying," he says, lips pursed. "But I want Chinese."

Jason smiles, as apologetically as he can. "Chinese it is, then."

It's the best he can do.

The next night he goes back to work. The bartender in question, Stacy, is as apologetic as can be over what happened, no matter how much Jason tries to assure her it's all right. A black eye on his part is a small price to pay for her safety, but he still takes the small packet of cookies she baked him as thanks, nonetheless.

Talon will like them, he's sure.

Opening goes well, and there's a few quiet hours before the main crowd starts to come in after eight. Jason busies himself with the smaller tasks in the back for a while, making sure enough glasses are washed to keep up, the registers are supplied with change and opening up new casks of beer while the girls serve. Until the time comes for them to take a break and he goes to stand behind the bar himself for thirty minutes.

That's when they come in.

Stacy's ex is in the lead, with two other men behind him. The bruises Jason left on his face stand out loud and livid as he brute forces his way through the tables towards him, and Jason sighs, already reaching for the bat under the counter because he knows this won't end well.

"There he is!" Stacy's ex hisses, once he's close enough, "That's the guy! The one who got between me an' Stacy!"

"I thought I told you not to come back here." Jason keeps his own voice calm and level in comparison. He barely glances at the two other men behind him, except to register that they're both tall and hulking. "If you and your friends don't leave now, I'm going to have to call the police."

Except he'd rather not if he can help it. Gotham police rarely bring anything but more trouble. Jason doesn't have any room in his budget for bribes, either.

The ex, his name is Steve or something, Jason remembers, chortles. “Yeah? You just try it. Cops ain’t gonna do anything to help your sorry ass when they see who my friends are here.”

“Seriously, man?” Jason rolls his eyes, “You couldn’t take me on your own, so you bring two other guys to help you, and you think that makes you look tough? Just take what’s left of your dignity and go. Stacy’s made her decision, she doesn’t want you.”

“Yeah, well,” Steve looks even more incensed, puffing up his chest in a ludicrous attempt to look bigger, “By the time we’re done with you, she ain’t going to want you either!”

“Oh Christ, you really...” Jason resists the urge to slap his hand to his face, keeping it wrapped around the handle of the baseball bat instead. “I told you last night, she didn’t leave you for me, you oversized mealworm. I’m just her boss.”

“That just means you probably got her sucking your dick under the table!”

Jason winces. Steve is being too loud and starting to draw the attention of the other patrons, who he really doesn’t want overhearing comments like that being made. Maybe he can still salvage this situation with words if he appeals to Steve’s friends instead.

“Look,” he turns his eyes up at them, “I don’t know what he’s told you, but I didn’t get between him and Stacy. She dumped him because he’s an asshole and his ego won’t let him take it. So just do what’s best for all three of you and get him out of here.”

Only then he notices that one of the men is looking at him strangely. Not in the way Steve is, like he wants Jason ten kinds of dead yesterday, but like...

“Hey, don’t I know you?”

Jason feels himself go very still, staring at the man in return. He’s older, brunette, with streaks of grey starting to run through his hair at the temples. Brown eyes, a plain face... Forgettable, yet also disconcertingly familiar.

Shit.

Feeling cold sweat start to run down his back, Jason raises his chin higher. “I doubt it.”

The guy isn't put off, though. Instead, a slow smile starts to creep over his face as he snaps his fingers in recognition, while next to him Steve and their other companion only look confused. "Yeah, yeah I do. Damn, you got bigger."

"Phil, man, what the hell are you talking about?"

"This guy!" Phil laughs, waving one hand towards Jason, whose stomach has now dropped out entirely underneath him. There's something sadistically cruel about that laugh, filled with the kind of joy only real scumbags get at the knowledge they're about to ruin someone else's life. "He used to be one of them street kids down at Crime Alley. One of them who used to run messages and steal for the gangs. Real quick on his feet he was." Then his smirk widens, "And at getting down on his knees."

Steve, who had started to look a little pissy over having his thunder stolen, suddenly brightens back up again. "Yeah?"

"You're going to want to shut your mouth, right now," Jason tries to warn Phil, fingers gripping the bar like a lifeline.

"No, I'm not." Phil isn't cowed in the slightest as he makes a show of looking round them at the other patrons. "What I'm actually thinking is, unless you want all these nice people know their drinks are getting poured for them by a former Park Row whore, you owe my friend Steve here an apology."

Jason swallows, trying not to feel like the walls are starting to close in around him. "Fuck you!" he hisses, "You tell them that, I'm going to tell them exactly how old I was when you used to come see me."

Phil snorts, like he just said something cute. "You think I'm scared of that? Even if they care, none of these bozos are gonna lift a finger in your defence, and when I leave, it's still gonna be what I said they remember most." He leans further across the bar, getting deliberately into his space while Steve and the other man chortle. "But, hey just for that threat, I think you're going to have to do more than just say sorry. I think you're gonna wait till those girls come back, then meet me and the boys in the alley behind this dump. Then we can all have a nice little private party where you make it up to us. I'm sure you still know how to turn a decent trick, dontcha?"

Screw appearances, Jason starts to pull out the bat, but the moment he does, Phil is patting the inside of his jacket.

“Ah, ah, sweetheart. I’m pretty sure what I’m packing here will make a bigger mess than whatever toy you’ve got hidden down there.”

Fuck. Jason shakily lets go of the handle again. He doesn’t believe for an instant that Phil is lying about that. The more he looks at him, the more he’s starting to remember. That while he’s not quite the big shot Steve claimed his friends were last night, he is semi-high up in one of Gotham’s resident gangs. More than high enough to be carrying, and probably high enough to get away with doing to Jason whatever he wants.

He needs to get out of this. He needs to. He has to...

He can’t.

Jason can’t even hear the sound of the music playing through the speakers anymore as Phil starts to reach out to him, brushing thick fingers down his jaw. It feels like everything he’s built over the last couple of years is about to be ripped out from under him, and he can’t do a damn thing to stop it.

Which is when something even more unexpected than Phil’s appearance back in his life happens.

A hand, deceptively slender, reaches over Phil’s shoulder, seizes the front of his coat, then rips him back away from the bar and Jason. The next moment, Steve and the third thug follow suit.

“T?!” Jason blinks, the name falling from his lips in a gasp. Sound has returned to him like thunder, accompanied by music and a woman’s scream as he realises just who it is that has intervened on his behalf.

Talon stands in the middle of the bar, poised in a dancer’s stance above the three men. He’s wearing a pair of jeans, the boots that went with his Court uniform, and what looks like one of Jason’s own spare jackets, as well as the ridiculous sunglasses Jason gave him the first night in his apartment.

And he looks pissed.

“Who the fuck are you?!” Phil says demandingly, already reaching into his jacket for his gun.

Before he can even come close to getting it out, Talon steps forward and kicks his arm away. Phil howls in pain, while behind him, Steve and the other guy are starting to stagger back up to their feet. Talon is

unconcerned, though, as he leans down closer to Phil, and says the stupidest, yet most wonderful line Jason has ever heard another human being utter in his lifetime.

“I’m the bouncer.”

What follows next is a swift but devastating show of violence. It’s three against one, yet Phil, Steve and the other don’t manage to lay even so much as a finger on Talon before he puts them down. Every blow and kick is quick, powerful and utilitarian. And it isn’t until those motions look ready to take on a distinctly more lethal tone that Jason is able to break out of his shock and move again.

With a shove of his arms and legs, he hops the bar, past the girls who have come out of the back to see what all the noise is about and onto the floor, where he lunges to catch Talon’s arm to stop him from doing something they’ll both regret later.

“Whoa, whoa! Easy there, T! I think they got the message!” He manages a strained laugh as Talon looks back at him in confusion. “Damn, you showed up just in the nick of time there. Thanks.”

“Jason—”

Jason squeezes his arm tighter, hoping to communicate everything with his face that he can’t put into words. As much as it would satisfy some dark, vicious part of him to see Phil bleeding and broken now (alongside all his other johns), it’s not worth what will happen afterwards. Not when it’ll bring cops crawling round them, and possibly worse.

Talon seems to understand, if the upset twist of his mouth is anything to go by. He looks back down at the three men, then snaps, “Leave!” at them, in a coldly chilling voice that promises misery should they ever think to come back again.

They do, at first crawling away across the floor, then limping out the door. Jason squeezes Talon’s arm again, starting to sag with gratitude and relief both. That’s when Stacy comes running up to him.

“Jason! Oh my god, Jason, I’m so sorry! I should’ve been here. I should’ve... are you all right?” Her eyes snap from him to Talon. “Who’s this?”

“I’m fine.” he manages, “I’m fine, I...” His eyes also turn to Talon. “This is, uh, T. He’s...” Shit. He can’t think, and so ends up

compounding the lie Talon already told. “He’s our new bouncer. Just hired him last night, guess I forgot to tell you.”

Her brow wrinkles in confusion. “But you said we don’t have the budget for—”

“Actually, Stacy, I need to have a few quick words with him in my office now. Contract stuff. I know it’s a few minutes early, but can you and Dora start serving for me again, please? Thanks!”

Without waiting for a reply from her, he pulls Talon towards the back of the bar.

“What the hell, T?!” Jason demands, as soon as the office door is shut behind them. “What the hell?”

He’s trembling, he realises, as he reaches out with an unsteady hand to grip the edge of his desk. The office is small and terribly cramped, just a square of a room with a desk, chair and ancient computer squeezed in alongside a filing cabinet. Normally, he’s fine with that, but right now it feels like the walls are closing in around him, and he can’t breathe for it. He can’t—

“Jason,” Talon says, in a far calmer tone. “Sit down.”

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he protests weakly, wavering, “I told you not to.”

Talon’s hands land on his shoulders, and Jason blinks as he suddenly finds himself sitting in the chair. “I know,” he says quietly, “But I wanted to make sure you weren’t going to get hurt again.”

Under other circumstances, he’d be proud of Talon in a way for making his own decision and going against what he said. But right now, Jason’s so shaken he can only think of how it could have gone wrong. How it could still go wrong. If Phil and Steve come back with reinforcements, or tell the wrong people what they saw.

“Breathe, Jason.” Talon says.

Belatedly, Jason realises he hasn’t been, and forces himself to gulp in air. It feels like every inch of skin on his body is crawling with ants.

"I'm fine," he tries, "I would've been fine."

The look on Talon's face when he says that is patently disbelieving, even with the sunglasses, and he briefly disappears from Jason's view before returning with a bottle of water in his hands. One Jason vaguely remembers leaving on his desk earlier.

"Drink." is the next order.

It takes a few tries for Jason to get the cap off, but once he does the water feels like the elixir of life itself against his throat, sending the first bolt of clarity back into his brain from the constant panic that's been running through it ever since he realised who Phil was. He gulps down more in response, then takes another minute to breathe in deep, until finally it feels like his heartbeat is slowing back down to a normal rate and the walls are back where they belong again.

Talon stays kneeling down in front of him the entire time, quietly watching.

"Who were they?" he asks.

Jason swallows again, this time tasting nothing but saliva. It's harder to answer than it should be, but Talon doesn't push. He just waits, never once turning his face away from him.

Eventually, Jason finds the words.

"The guy in the middle was Stacy's ex, the one who gave me this last night." He indicates his black eye. "The one on the left, I have no fucking idea who he was. But the one on the right, he..." *Come on, you can say it.* "He's someone I knew back when I was young. Back when I lived on the streets. I didn't recognise him at first," he sniffs, "But he did me."

"He was the one who was threatening you when I intervened."

Jason nods jerkily. He could just leave it at that, he knows, but like a sinner at confession, he carries on. "Back then... I used to steal to survive. Tyres mostly, but anything else I knew I could sell as well. Sometimes, though," he swallows hard, "Sometimes it wasn't enough. Sometimes..." He shifts his hands together after setting the bottle aside, scratching at the inside of his wrist. "Sometimes I had to sell myself."

The air seems terribly still for a moment, then Jason feels a hand

cover his. He blinks to see Talon touching him once again.

“Do you want me to kill them?”

“What?”

It's not the response Jason expects. Not the shock or dreaded pity. Talon asks the question with only cold steel in his voice. “They have a head start, but I could still find them easily enough.”

Jason's breath catches in his chest. “Are you serious?”

Talon doesn't look away from him, not even for an instant. “Yes.”

“I...” Jason doesn't know how to respond. Having such an offer placed before him is unthinkable. “I thought you said you didn't want to kill people?”

Talon's head dips, just slightly. “Not for the Court.”

He really means it, Jason realises. If he says the word, Talon will flit from his side, find Phil and rain death down upon him and his friends. He feels dizzy again for a moment, knowing such power is in his hands. The sort of power that he used to long for as a child, and if he's honest with himself, sometimes still does when faced not just with the memory of his own suffering, but the suffering of everyone else around him as well. Suffering caused by those who prey on the weak and desperate. By people like Phil.

One word. All he has to do is say one word, and at least one ghost from his past will be exorcised.

Just one word.

“No.” Jason shakes his head. “No, I can't—*won't* ask you to do that for me, T.”

Now it's Talon's turn to look surprised, his eyebrows briefly lifting above the sunglasses.

“Don't get me wrong, I want him dead.” his voice comes out all the hoarser as he says it, “Fucker deserves that and worse, but not at the cost of you getting blood on your hands.”

“I already have blood on my hands, Jason.”

“And you don't need any more.” He shakes his head again, ignoring

the way his throat hurts and his eyes sting. "I'm not worth it."

Talon watches him for a moment, then his hand squeezes Jason's tighter. "No, you're wrong. You're the only person who is."

"What?" he stares at him.

Talon doesn't turn his gaze away, at least so far as Jason can tell. "You're good and kind, and you took me in and helped me, even after I almost killed you. You're worth it, Jason."

Upon hearing those words, something hard and painful shakes loose inside his chest. Jason turns his head away from Talon on instinct as the stinging in his eyes worsens. "Fuck."

"Jason?" Talon now sounds alarmed, like he's worried he's done something wrong.

"It's fine, I'm fine." Jason tugs a hand loose to wipe at his face hurriedly. He hates crying, hates the shameful weakness of it. "I just... Shit, no one's ever said anything like that to me before."

Talon's hand cautiously shifts to his leg. "Never?"

"No." Jason shakes his head, still trying to get ahold of himself. He's held it together for so long, he's not ready to fall apart now. "Not that I remember, anyway."

Maybe when he was small, a baby or a toddler, his mother might have said something like that. She couldn't always have been such an addict, after all, or he'd never have even made it out of infancy in her care, but he doesn't remember it. He barely remembers the times she did say she loved him, pressing a gentle kiss against his head before he went to bed.

Or maybe that's all just in his imagination. A stretch of wishful thinking for something normal in place of the far more vivid memories of her collapsed on the bathroom floor, while he desperately tried to stop her from choking on her own vomit.

"I mean it," Talon says.

"I know," Jason replies, taking one deep breath after another. "I know you mean it." Feeling a modicum of self-control reinstate itself, he looks back down at Talon. "And it means a lot to me that you do. That after everything you've been through, you would... it means a lot."

Talon frowns, "But you still don't want me to."

"No," Maybe he's imagining things, but Jason thinks he sees Talon's shoulders sink down a little in what might be relief. "The risk isn't worth the reward, T. Not to you. Not for the attention it might bring. Christ, you shouldn't even be *here*."

"If I hadn't been here, they would have hurt you." Talon reminds him. "And I can take care of myself."

"I know, I know. I just..." Jason leans back in his chair, shuddering at the thought of it. "I don't want anything to happen to you, either."

They both know he's not talking about people like Phil with that sentence.

Talon breathes in sharply, then stands up. Jason feels a sharp pang of loss for the contact between them, before seeing with relief that he's only going so far as to sit on the edge of his desk. Shoulders curving inwards, Talon crosses his arms over his chest. "It's not fair that happened to you."

Jason smiles weakly. "If the world was fair, neither of us would be where we are now, T." They probably never would have even met. "Thank you."

Talon shrugs sharply, like he's as uncomfortable with gratitude as Jason is, but at the same time he shifts one of his legs, just enough that their boots touch on the floor. It makes the warm feeling that took up residence in Jason's chest settle even further. "So, what now?"

"Now..."

Jason slumps back in his chair and thinks. Now, he wants nothing more than to hide in here with Talon for the rest of the night, but he knows he can't. "Now I gotta go back to work. If I stay in here much longer, one of the girls is going to come looking for me. And..." His eyes widen, remembering, "I told them and everyone else in the bar that I'd hired you on as a bouncer. Shit, how the hell am I going to explain that one away?"

"That's easy, you don't."

Jason looks back up at him, and the question must show on his face because Talon continues, "I meant what I said, I want to make sure you don't get hurt again."

“T,” Jason says carefully, because he’s already been knocked for a loop so many times today he doesn’t think he can take one more without having a complete mental breakdown. “I... you... you really want to work as a bouncer here?”

Talon nods down at him. “If it means I can protect you.”

Jason bites his lip. He wants to tell him no. He *should* tell him no. “You’d have to be here every day I am. Be around people. The lights, the music...”

“I can cope with that,” Talon says, “I have my glasses.”

Jason shakes his head at him. “I wouldn’t be able to pay you.”

“You don’t need to pay me. You already give me everything I need.” Talon presses their feet harder together. “Let me do this, Jason. Please.”

A sudden, maddening urge to reach up and pull Talon down closer to him threatens to seize Jason for a moment. He resists only by the skin of his teeth.

It’s not supposed to be this way, I’m supposed to be the one looking out for you.

“You shouldn’t do it just for me, T.” he tries, as one last token protest. “There are other, better things you could be doing. You could leave the city, see the world. You could—”

“Jason,” Talon cocks his head at him, amused or maybe exasperated, possibly both at once, “Say yes, or I’ll spend every night sitting up on the roof of this place where you can’t stop me anyway.”

And that, as they say, puts an end to that.

“All right.”

He expects Talon to get bored after a couple of days at the job, which makes it easier for Jason to have him at the bar at first. It feels odd getting up every morning with the knowledge Talon is coming to work with him. Odd to walk down the street together in grey daylight, close

enough that their shoulders almost brush with every step, while they share a sweet pastry from Jason's favourite bakery between them. Then to have Talon acknowledged by Stacy, Dora and Kyle, his other server, when they come in.

They're unsure of him to begin with, which Jason understands. Talon isn't exactly what people would expect to see in a bouncer. He's under six feet, lean instead of bulky, yet still clearly dangerous. The fact that he's so quiet and always keeps his sunglasses on doesn't help matters either. But the girls at least were there for Talon saving Jason from Stacy's ex, which works to soothe away any initial misgivings, while for Kyle it only takes a single demonstration of Talon's ability.

"Holy shit, man," he says, raising a pierced eyebrow the first time he sees Talon restrain a man twice his size like it's nothing, "You hired us a freaking ninja."

"He's not a ninja, he's a..." Jason stops, unsure of how else to describe Talon, then shrugs and allows himself a small smile. "Yeah, okay, he might be a ninja."

"Badass." Kyle says admiringly, as Talon escorts the drunkard out, and Jason unwittingly feels a small flush of pride in his chest.

Talon is a badass. A fact that's both terrifying and comforting in the coming weeks. Having him nearby every night, sat quiet and unobtrusive at the table in the darkest corner of the bar, is a reassurance that any trouble that comes from his customers is no longer Jason's problem to deal with. But on the other hand, it also spawns anxiety that trouble may yet come from other directions, should they ever slip up at any point. The only thing that protects rumours of Talon's true identity from spreading are a flimsy pair of sunglasses, after all, and if just one of his staff or patrons starts to talk about the bar's bouncer having golden eyes...

He shudders at the thought of it, sick to his stomach.

"You need to stop worrying," Talon says, when he notices. Or more accurately, when Jason subtly tries to hint that he stop for the twentieth time. "I'm here to protect you; not make you afraid for me."

"You say that like it's something I can help." Jason replies, dropping his head down onto the polished surface of the bar, where under his nose the smell of decades of spilt beer overpowers anything else. It's a tad overdramatic of him maybe, but since it's past closing time and no one else is around to see him except Talon, he feels entitled to making

an ass of himself. “We spent the last two months trying to make sure Batman won’t find you, now you’re sitting out in the open.”

He hears the whisper of Talon moving on the other side of the bar, the drag of leather as he leans down on it close to him. “I’m not out in the open.” he says.

“It’s close enough.” He mutters.

“I don’t think Batman is looking for me anymore, either.”

Jason sucks in a breath. “You can’t be sure about that, and even if he isn’t, that doesn’t mean he’s forgotten about you. All it would take is one word in the wrong ear and he or that kid partner of his would be on our asses.”

A few seconds silence follows, then Jason hears a sound he’s never heard before. A soft, husky chuckle.

He looks up again, startled. “Did... did you just *laugh* at me?”

“Yes.” Talon appears surprised at it himself, though his familiar small smile lingers about his lips. “You’re a worrywart.”

Jason’s mouth falls open. He feels stunned, proud and annoyed all at once. “I’m a what?”

“A worrywart.” Jason sees that smile grow ever so slightly wider. “Because you worry.”

“Yes, I know what it means. But I’m not—Talon, it’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.” Talon counters.

Jason huffs at him and drums his fingers down upon the bartop. “I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

The smile fades, replaced by seriousness. “I know,” Talon says, “And you do. You have. But I want to repay the favour, too.”

“I told you before,” Jason mutters, “You don’t owe me anything for any of this. All I want you to do is—”

“Figure out what I want.” Talon finishes for him, the look in his golden eyes now gone pensive and considerate. “But...” It’s like he steps back a month then, voice turned soft and hesitant by fear. “What if what I want is this?”

Jason bites his lip. "There are better things than this."

Talon's whole body twitches, and he turns his head to the side. "I like being here," he says, "I like being with you. I like knowing that you're close. Being in your apartment while you were gone... it was lonely."

The words almost undo him. Jason feels his heart miss a few beats in his chest. "I'm not going to make you stop," he says, hoarsely, moving round what's too hot and close for him to address. "I just want you to be sure. To take everything into consideration. There's so much more you could—"

"Don't do that."

"Don't do what?" He looks at Talon again, noticing the tilt of his mouth has now taken on an angry bend.

"Doubt me. Try and make me doubt myself because you think you know what's better for me." Talon leans back from the bar, "That's something *they* would do."

And just like that, shame hits Jason like a waterfall, breaking everything else.

"I'm sorry," he says, "Shit, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." He feels so sick with the thought of being in anyway like the ones who had used and abused Talon for so long, his hands actually start to shake from it. "I am so fucking bad at this."

A whisper of a sigh, and Talon's posture softens again, though Jason doesn't see it for a moment, starting as he is down at his hands. "You're not, you're just afraid."

Damn right he's afraid. Afraid of far more than he's willing to admit, maybe. Which, given how much he hates to admit fear of anything, isn't surprising. Swallowing hard, Jason shakes his head. "Maybe, but I'm still sorry."

"Just don't try to make me leave again." Talon says to him, "Please."

Talon leaving is the last thing he wants, which is somewhat the problem.

"I won't." Jason promises. Then, still thrown, turns and retrieves himself a bottle of bourbon and a glass from the shelf behind the bar.

Talon watches him pour, then drink, before asking, "Can I try that?"

Jason blinks, "You want to try bourbon?"

"I never have before." Talon shrugs, just one shoulder, short and sharp. "Not any kind of alcohol."

In that case, Jason would hardly recommend bourbon as his first encounter, but he's still feeling too raw right now to deny Talon anything. He reaches for another glass. "Sure, why not. At least you're actually legal for it, unlike me."

Talon quirks an eyebrow. "You manage a bar and you're not legal?"

"The laws for drinking and working around alcohol are two different things in this state, unsurprisingly." Jason pours him a finger. "Also I might have, uh, used a fake I.D. when applying for the job. Pretty sure Jim saw through it, but this is Gotham. So long as I'm not trying to swindle him or burn the place down, he doesn't care how old I am."

"How old are you?" Talon asks, and it occurs then to Jason that despite knowing Talon's age, he's never actually given him his own before.

"Twenty. You're going to want to sip that first, by the way."

As he says it, Talon already has the glass almost to his lips, clearly ready to throw back the bourbon the same way he'd seen Jason do it. Hastily, he changes his approach.

"Oh, that's..." Talon doesn't cough and splutter the way Jason's seen some first-time drinkers do with hard liquor, but he does wince. "Sharp."

"Yeah, you jumped up a few levels from where most people start." Jason smiles a little, watching him take another cautious swallow, then another. "You like it?"

"Maybe?"

Without being asked, Jason pours him another. "Well then here, use this one to make up your mind. I'm going to finish up what else needs doing, then we can go home."

After the conversation they've just had, he's too tired to think of doing anything else.

“You could have told me, you know.”

“Told you what?” Jason is leaning on the bar, filling out an order form two weeks later when Stacy comes up beside him. Things have been quiet between him and Talon since that emotionally fraught conversation, and true to his word, Jason hasn’t tried to discourage him from continuing to work here again. It’s allowed a comfortable atmosphere to settle back between them, even if it can’t stop Jason from continuing to be, as Talon called him, something of a worrywart over the situation.

“About you and T, stupid.” She rolls her eyes at him, “You know I won’t judge you for it, right?”

Jason blinks at her, and tries not to let his mind run down all the worst paths of what she could mean by that statement. There’s no way Stacy can know about anything like the Court of Owls or Batman. “Still not following you, Stace. Judge me for what?.”

“Come on,” she raises her eyebrows, then nods towards the corner where Talon is sitting and playing with a deck of cards Jason found for him in the back. “I know you two are dating each other.”

Of all the things for her to say, that’s the last he expected. Jason’s mouth falls open, then he coughs like he’s swallowed a bug.

“We are not...” he struggles to breathe, and quickly waves off Talon’s sudden look of concern from his table, before shifting to stand with his back turned towards him. “We are not dating!” he hisses at Stacy, wary of being overheard.

She only looks amused at his denial. “It’s all right, Jason. Seriously. I don’t care if you’re gay. None of us here do.”

“I am not... I mean, I am...” Shit, a discussion of his sexuality is also something he doesn’t want to get into tonight. Jason reaches up, rubbing a hand down his face. “We are not dating. I don’t even know what would make you say that.”

“Um, maybe try everything about you two?” She attempts to glance round him at Talon, who Jason obscures by leaning in the same

direction. “There’s the fact he shows up here to work every day wearing your old jacket, to start.”

“That doesn’t mean—wait, how do you know that’s my old jacket?”

“I pay attention to the things people wear, duh.” Undeterred, Stacy smiles up at him, “Don’t worry, I think it’s cute.”

Cute is one word for it. Jason feels unwanted heat creep into his cheeks. “It’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it?” She tilts her head, making the long earrings she’s wearing tonight jingle against her shoulders. “Then why do you two always arrive for work together before the rest of us? And leave together after we’re already gone, too?”

“Because...” Keeping Talon as a man of mystery to his staff now feels like a mistake, if it’s allowed such wild theorising to run rampant. Jason swallows. “Because we live together, all right? And no, before you say it, not because we’re dating. He’s just a friend. A friend who’s been through a rough time lately. He needed a place to stay and somewhere to work, so I offered him my couch and a job here. He borrows my clothes because he had to leave his last place so quickly he couldn’t take any of his own.”

“Oh.” Stacy stares at him, clearly taken aback. “I’m sorry, I... I just thought... what with the way you two look at each other... Why didn’t you say anything before?”

The lie comes smoother than he’d like. “Because I know it’s not professional to hire someone like that just because they’re a friend. I didn’t want you guys to think less of me for it.”

Her stare turns into a frown. “We’d never think less of you for wanting to help out a friend, Jason. Not after everything you’ve already done for us.”

“I know.” The wave of shame he feels next is equally real. “I guess it’s also that... well, it’s private, his reasons for being here. I didn’t want anyone to go speculating on his past, or making him feel uncomfortable for it.”

“Good job on that.” Relaxing back, Stacy sighs. “Shit, now I owe Kyle ten bucks.”

“Wait, you were betting on us?”

She wilts back under his sudden glare. “Just a little. Sorry again?”

Jason sighs himself, reflecting that he should just be grateful she’s agreeing with him. “Whatever. Just go finish getting ready for opening.”

Stacy bobs her head in agreement, and makes it three steps away before Jason stops her again.

“Wait... what did you mean by, ‘the way you two look at each other?’”

The corner of Stacy’s lips creep up in a pink painted smile. “Oh, just that you can’t seem to take your eyes off each other, that’s all. At least when you think the other one isn’t looking.”

And with that, she bounces off to get the last of the clean glasses out of the back, leaving Jason feeling like someone just dropped a very hot rock in his pocket.

Over the course of the next month, Jason holds Stacy’s words in the back of his head like a noose around his neck, and constantly fights the urge to try and catch Talon out. To see if he really has been doing what she said he’s been doing: looking at Jason whenever he can’t see him. Which of course, by its nature is difficult to do, and Talon’s sunglasses only make it worse. To the point that eventually he just gives up on the attempt.

Stacy was probably just imagining things, anyway; it’s not like Talon’s sunglasses would make it easy for her to make accurate observations of his behaviour either. Far more concerning is the notion that he himself has been so obviously doing it, and in that Jason is far more successful at catching himself out.

He has, of course, on some deep, subatomic level, been aware before now that he’s attracted to Talon. Physically at first, then in every other way as well. But to be called out on it, to have that attraction dragged kicking and screaming out into the daylight by someone close to him, is another matter entirely. He knows it’s not right for him to feel this way. To stand admiring the line of Talon’s jaw, the elegance of his hands when he should be working. To feel so deeply attached to

the way Talon has slotted himself into his life, like a piece of the puzzle he never knew needed to be there. And worst of all, to fear what it might mean for himself should he ever decide to leave.

And he will decide to leave. No matter what he says now, eventually he'll want to spread his wings and explore more of the life the Court denied to him. Jason is used to that. He's used to people leaving. So he always tries to maintain a safe distance between him and the people in his life. Only this time it's become apparent he's failed. This time...

He stomps down on the feelings, as hard and ruthlessly as he can. He's Talon's friend and that's all he'll ever be. It's all Talon needs from him, as he continues figuring out his life and who he is now that he's free from the Court. As long as he needs it, Jason will help him with that, and never ask for more.

Life settles further. The routine of work and home repeated day after day with Talon by his side, throughout which Jason works hard to keep up the illusion of normalcy they had before. He doesn't think Talon notices anything amiss, but then with him it's sometimes hard to tell. Even after three months of living together, Jason can't read everything from him, as much as he'd like to.

He tries not to worry about that too much, and instead focuses on the good things. Like the way Talon continues opening up around him. How that one laugh he'd let loose while teasing Jason in the bar steadily blossoms into more. Sometimes at jokes on the television, but also more frequently over their shared banter while cooking and cleaning. Or when Mrs. Vasiliev comes hammering on Jason's door to tell him he's late taking out her garbage.

"You really do help everyone, don't you?" Talon says softly to him, one time after he comes back from doing that, and Jason shrugs as he sets down the large tupperware container of pierogi Mrs. Vasiliev had insisted he take home with him in exchange, because 'You and that boy you live with now are too skinny'.

"Only those who deserve it." He tries not to meet his gaze. "People I like."

He sees Talon smile out of the corner of his eye anyway.

Home. Work. Home. Work. Despite his determination to remain vigilant, Jason finally feels himself start to relax from a state of constantly worrying over Talon's safety. Which is, of course, the exact

moment their luck runs out.

It's impossible to say what it is that gave them away. Whether it was a street camera or an eye-witness, an unfortunate rumour or pure coincidence. All Jason knows and cares about is that one night, after they've closed and he's turned off the main lights to allow Talon to remove his sunglasses while he empties out the cash register, Batman walks into the bar.



It takes them a moment to register his presence. Perhaps a moment to believe that he's really there. Even Talon is taken aback by the suddenness of his arrival. So much so that, in a strange turn of events, Jason is the one who recovers enough to act first.

He doesn't even think about it, truth be told. Jason sees Batman and in a flash his hand closes around the handle of the baseball bat he keeps under the bar, before he vaults over the countertop and into the space between him and Talon.

"Get out." he says.

It's not a smart decision, not in any way. Jason may be twenty now rather than twelve, but looking into the grim visage of Batman, it still feels like the man towers over him the same way he did back then. And now, unfortunately for him, Jason no longer has a child's indomitable bravado to fight back with. Nor the illusion of childhood innocence to protect him. If he socks Batman in the gut with the baseball bat here, the same way he did with the tyre iron eight years ago, it's far less likely to end well for him.

But still he stands his ground.

"You need to move." Batman rumbles, like the slow roll of a freight train into the yard.

"No, I don't think I do." Jason raises his chin, trying to compensate for the slickness of sweat he can already feel on his palms. "You're not welcome here, Batman."

He can't see what Talon's doing behind him, but he can see the way Batman's looking past him, over Jason's shoulder. His attention is clearly focused on what he considers to be the real threat in the room, and his next words confirm it.

"I'm not here for you." Jason's hand grips the bat tighter. "The man behind you—"

"Is my employee, and my friend. You are not taking him."

"Jason," It's Talon's voice now, speaking to him, and Jason feels the lightest touch of a hand to his back.

Too close, is all he can think, he's too close to Batman. All the man would have to do now is throw Jason aside to get to him.

“Go, T,” he says, trying to sound like he knows what he’s doing, “Get out of here.”

A ripple of surprise runs through Batman. At least, Jason thinks it does. “You know who he is?”

“Better than you do,” Jason challenges back. He must have thought that Talon had lied to get his position here. Disguised himself as a normal man in order to hide. Well, he’s only half-right in that respect. “So piss off already.”

Of course, it’s not that easy. Batman draws himself up, somehow seeming to become taller within the folds of his cape. “I can’t do that. The man you’re trying to protect is dangerous—an assassin. He needs to come with me.”

“No, he doesn’t. He isn’t.” Jason feels Talon try to tug at his arm, but responds only by moving it up in a further attempt to shield him from Batman. “The Court of Owls is gone; he told me you took them down. That means he’s free now. He doesn’t have to do what they or anyone else says anymore.”

Batman takes another step forward, causing Jason’s hand to tighten impossibly more around the bat, then stops again with his head slightly tilted. “What do you mean?”

It’s not a question he expects, and Jason is sorely tempted to look back at Talon before answering, only he can’t take his eyes off Batman. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t. Explain.”

It’s spoken like an order, and Jason feels it rankle at him almost more than anything else. He bares his teeth. “Talon...”

It’s not his story to tell. Not if Batman’s as clueless as he’s trying to make out he is. And if Talon doesn’t want it to be told, even to try and stop Batman’s pursuit of him, Jason won’t.

But god, he hopes he does.

Talon’s hand squeezes his arm now, rather than just pulls his sleeve. “It’s okay, Jason.” he murmurs, just loud enough to be heard.

Jason swallows. “I mean the fact that he never served the Court willingly. I mean the fact that they kidnapped him when he was a

child and used him as a slave to do their bidding. I mean the fact that since he's been free of them, he hasn't hurt anyone, and he isn't going to ever again."

Batman's face is unreadable after his pronouncement, and the long seconds of silence that follow seem to stretch out into years as Jason waits for him to respond to it. "He told you this?"

"Yes."

"And you believe him."

"Of course I do."

"Why?"

A flash of annoyance runs through Jason, but he bites down on it. Batman could probably cut through him in an instant if he wanted to, and the fact he's listening at all feels like a minor miracle. He needs to keep him doing so if he's willing to. This way, maybe Jason actually has a chance of convincing him to leave Talon alone. "Because I'm not stupid. I grew up in Crime Alley, I know what an abuse victim looks like." He swallows, "And because he spared my life, back on the night he was supposed to kill you. I found him, talked to him; if he was a true believer in the Court then, he would've killed me to keep me quiet, but he didn't. He's someone who needs help, not prison, Batman."

The quiet that follows that statement is such that Jason swears he could hear a pin drop if someone cared to throw one. His heart beats faster as he readjusts his grip on the baseball bat, before he's momentarily distracted by the press of Talon's chest to his back as he crowds in closer to him. He's glad to know he's not the only nervous one here, even if he does wish Talon would still take the opportunity Jason's trying to give him to run.

Batman's frown deepens. "If that's true," he says, making it clear he's talking to Talon now with the direction of his gaze, "Then why did you run from me? If you'd explained, I could have helped you."

Jason feels Talon's grip on him tighten. "You're Batman. You punish bad people."

"You're not a bad person, T." he murmurs reassuringly over his shoulder, before Batman can say anything.

“I killed people.”

“Because you had to to survive, you were just a kid when it started, and anyway, a bad person wouldn’t feel guilty the way you do.” Looking back at Batman, Jason says, “Your help? You mean dump him somewhere so he can be someone else’s problem? Yeah, we don’t need that, thanks.”

It’s hard to read expression beneath the cowl, but Jason thinks he might have just shocked Batman with that statement. “If you’re talking about Arkham...” he starts to say.

“Arkham, Blackgate...” Jason swallows, licks his lips, then in a moment of unplanned pettiness adds, “Ma Gunn’s School for Boys.”

Batman goes very, very still at the name.

“Who are you?” he asks.

“What, don’t you recognise me?” Jason says, baring his teeth again. This is his last card to play, and he’s not about to waste it. “You big boob.”

Batman rocks back a step, like someone physically shoved him. “Jason Todd.”

The urge to savour the moment is strong, but Jason resists it in favour of pressing his point. “In the flesh. So you see, you can take your ‘help’ and shove it; we’re doing fine on our own.”

Behind him, Talon makes a soft, questioning noise.

Batman recovers enough to step forward again. “I... Jason, please, believe me, if I’d known what that place truly was, I never would have left you there.”

“What you would have done doesn’t matter. What you did do *does*.” Jason keeps the baseball bat lifted high between them, even though his arm is now starting to ache. “I’ve managed fine on my own without you, and so will T. So hurry up and get out of my bar already.”

“I can see that.” The quiet thunder of Batman’s voice still sounds tinged with regret, before he draws himself back up. “But I still can’t just leave him here. If he truly regrets what he’s done—” Jason glares and Batman amends himself, “—what the Court forced him to do, he

should hand himself in. There are answers he could give to the families of victims, and the justice system would—”

“Tear him apart,” Jason interrupts, “They would tear him apart. I know this city, Batman, and the people here won’t care about what else the Court put him through. They’ll just want to see a murderer punished. Y’know, considering how many of the others around here keep getting a free pass.”

Batman chooses to ignore the last part of what he said. “So what do you suggest I do? Leave him here with you, based only on his and your word that what you say is true?”

“How about we stick him on Bat-parole?” a new voice intercedes on the conversation. Young, female, and with a deep Gotham accent similar to Jason’s own.

He starts at the sound of it, though apparently he’s the only one surprised. Talon doesn’t react, while Batman only half-turns to look back at the door, saying with exasperation, “I told you to wait outside.”

The girl Jason can now see leaning through the doorway looks close to the end of her teenage years, wearing black, red and yellow, with a headband holding back her long blonde hair from her face. A black domino mask sits across her eyes, while on her chest, a gold capital R is emblazoned.

Robin, he realises. She’s Robin.

“I am waiting outside.” Answering smartly, Robin points down to her feet, which are indeed still located outside of the bar, while only the upper half of her body leans in. “See?”

If Jason wasn’t sure his eyes were tricking him, he would say that Batman looks pained at the pronouncement.

“Robin...”

“And besides,” Ignoring him, she steps inside anyway. “You told me to wait outside because you didn’t think I was a match for *him*.” Robin turns her pointing finger to Talon, “But since he’s spent this whole encounter doing nothing more than hiding behind Babe Ruth over there like he’s afraid you’re going to steal his lunch money, I’d say I’m safe.”

“Robin.” Batman says, this time with more feeling.

Behind him, Jason feels Talon jolt. His own whisper of “Robin.” is barely audible, and without looking back, Jason fumbles behind him with his free hand until he finds Talon’s arm and gives it a comforting squeeze. He knows how sensitive a name that is to him, and the coincidence of Gotham’s junior defender also using it is one he maybe should have given thought to before. Except he’d always hoped this encounter would never actually happen, to the point of purposefully avoiding ever thinking about it beyond a looming threat on the horizon.

“What?” she raises her hands up, letting the door fall shut behind her, which Jason is distantly grateful about. He doesn’t need any passersby seeing Robin’s butt sticking out of his bar. “You know I’ve got a point.”

“Bat-parole.” Batman repeats, still glaring at her.

Jason has the sudden feeling he’s witnessing a very particular dynamic that not many in the world are privy to, or could even imagine existing. Certainly, what he remembers of Batman before never would have given him the sense the man would take this behaviour from a partner. But then, he was only twelve, and time has a way of diluting even the strongest of memories.

“Yeah.” Looking at Jason and Talon, Robin gives them a winning smile. “As in, y’know, we don’t drag him back to a prison cell, but don’t just let him off scot free either. We keep an eye on him, do some investigating to make sure his story checks out, and make sure he stays on his best behaviour.”

“I know what you meant.” Batman says, sounding more fatigued now.

She cocks his head at him, “Oh... Wait, are you objecting to the fact I called it ‘Bat-parole’ then, or just the idea in general?”

Batman breathes in sharply, but before he can say anything, Jason jumps in. “Do we have any say in this?”

“Not if you want the big man to take the better option.” Robin says wryly, before looking back at her boss. “C’mon, Batman,” she steps closer, tilting her head back to look up into his face. Beside Batman’s hulking figure, she looks positively tiny, and Jason has the sudden protective impulse to reach out and drag her behind him, too, even though rationally he knows she’s not in any danger. And could, most

likely, kick his ass just as well as Batman can. “You know you wanna find out the truth just as much as I do. There’s something to what they’re saying here, I feel it.”

Batman looks back down at her, and for the longest while nothing is said between them. Yet at the same time, a conversation is clearly going on, held in some silent form of communication no one but they can understand.

Finally, he sighs, “I’d rather do it with the Talon secured.”

“He’s been living with this guy for four months now without hurting anyone,” Robin points out, “I don’t think we have anything immediate to worry about there.” She looks back at them, while resting one hand on her hip. “Right?”

Jason still doesn’t like this. Not any of this. Even this potential offer of ‘parole’ seems unfair to him, but he’s also not stupid enough to ignore that this might be Talon’s only chance to stay here. “Right.” He squeezes Talon’s arm encouragingly, until, out of the corner of his eye, he sees him jerkily nod his own agreement.

Batman growls lightly, but then after a moment, something about the impossibly broad line of his shoulders seems to soften. “One chance,” is what he says to them, darkly threatening, “One is all you get to prove this to me. But if I find out you’re lying at any point, it will not end well for you.”

The effect is slightly undone by the sight of Robin giving them the thumbs up beside him.



“T?” Jason says, just to be sure he’s on board with this before they go any further.

It takes a moment, but then Talon swallows, “Yes, I understand.”

“Then let’s talk.” Batman says, “I need you to tell me everything you can. Anything that will help your case.”

“And can we sit down while we do it?” Robin adds, “Because I gotta tell you, we stopped three robberies on the way over here, and my feet are killing me tonight.”

Just like that, it feels like a spell is broken. Jason lets the baseball bat lower down to the floor, and hisses at the pain in his arm and shoulder for the shift in position. Grimly, he nods at a nearby table, one of the larger ones that will mean they’re not all sitting in each other’s laps for this. “Make yourself at home.”

Batman moves first and she follows him, making a slightly ridiculous picture as they sit together. Jason moves ahead of Talon to join them, while keeping the baseball bat in his hand. “Babe Ruth, really?” he asks Robin.

She shrugs, “He’s the only baseball player I know.”

Talon moves closer, then stops behind Jason’s chair, gripping the back of it. He’s still nervous, unsure, and Jason can’t blame him. It’s his freedom on the line here, and his place to do what is necessary to maintain it. And considering how long it’s taken Jason to learn all he has of Talon’s past from him, the prospect of just coming out and saying it to two people he doesn’t know (who were his enemies to boot) must be beyond intimidating.

Jason wishes he knew a way to make it easier for him.

“Well?” Batman says, a touch too impatiently for Jason’s liking when the wait starts to go on a little too long.

Talon squares his shoulders like a soldier on parade. Perhaps in response to the tone Batman uses, or perhaps because it helps him brace himself against what’s coming. “I want you to promise me something first.” he says.

Batman’s eyes aren’t visible behind the mask, but somehow he radiates disapproval all the same. At least until Robin elbows him in the ribs, prompting him to begrudgingly ask, “Promise you what?”

“That no matter what decision you make about me, you won’t hurt Jason.”

“T—” Jason starts to say, startled by the request.

Talon ignores him. “He hasn’t done anything wrong. He just wanted to help me, and I haven’t hurt anyone as long as I’ve been with him. He shouldn’t be punished for that.” He briefly hesitates again, then more quietly adds, “Please.”

The skin on Jason’s face feels uncomfortably warm. Wordlessly, he reaches up and puts his hand over where Talon’s hand is resting on the chair, while across from them both something about the hard lines of Batman’s shoulders seems to soften.

“I’d like to not have to hurt either of you.” he says, “But yes, so long as you’re honest with me, I promise no harm will come to Jason for his part in this.”

Jason may or may not imagine the tiny ‘Aw’ that escape’s Robin’s lips then.

Behind him, Talon nods stiffly. “Thank you.” But even so assured, it’s still a struggle for him to find the words.

“You got this, T,” Jason murmurs to help him. “Just start at the beginning, like when you told me.”

Talon fingers twitch under his own, then he nods again.

“The Court of Owls called me Talon,” he says, meeting Batman’s impenetrable gaze, “Jason calls me T. But my real name, the name I was given before they took it away from me, is Richard Grayson. I was born in Haly’s Circus, and used to perform with my parents as part of a trapeze act until they were murdered here in Gotham.”

He clearly means to go on from there, but before he can, maybe the most unexpected thing of the night yet happens. On the other side of the table, Robin suddenly jumps in her seat, before clapping her right hand over her ear with a noticeable wince, while Batman visibly stiffens beside her.

“Richard Grayson,” he repeats, like he can’t quite believe what he’s hearing. “Son of John and Mary Grayson?”

“Yes.” Talon confirms, leaning back warily. Jason, equally startled, keeps his grip firm on his hand.

“Holy shit!” Robin whispers, while still holding her hand over her ear.

“Holy shit, holy shit. Batman, he’s—”

“What?” Jason cuts in, demanding on Talon’s behalf.

“He’s...” Robin waves her free hand towards them, wincing again. “*Dick Grayson*. The missing kid from The Flying Grayson’s. One of Batman’s oldest cold cases. Holy shit, I cannot believe this. After all this time...”

“Robin,” Batman growls lightly.

“Everyone thought you were dead! But you’re not. And what happened to you, it was a big deal. Changed a friend of mine’s life, and I mean seriously changed it, in a totally obsessed over your disappearance kind of way. It’s why he works with Batman. Why I—”

“Robin!” This time the growl is darker and deeper. More commanding.

It shuts Robin up immediately. At least for a second anyway, then she smiles sheepishly. “But um, I guess we can talk about that more later. Like over coffee maybe. Sorry to interrupt. Please continue?”

Talon still eyes her like a bomb ready to go off. At least until Batman prompts him again. “You were nine years old when you disappeared. Just a child. Why would the Court take you and not someone older?”

His voice has the same tinge of distressed regret in it that it did when he tried to apologise to Jason over leaving him at Ma Gunn’s. To know Batman had actually tried to find Talon — or Dick as he was then — back after he first disappeared and failed...

“Jason?” Talon says, looking down at him. Jason abruptly realises he’s been squeezing his hand a little too hard.

“Sorry, T,” he says, to make up for it while loosening his grip. “It’s okay, keep going.”

The question Batman just asked is not one he’s ever thought to ask Talon himself. To Jason, the only thing that mattered about Talon’s past was that the Court *had* taken him. Had hurt him, used him. The exact reasoning of why it had to be Dick Grayson of all people had never mattered, not when knowing it wouldn’t change the trauma of what he went through. Jason cared more about helping him heal from that pain than dwelling over the reason for their choice, but it’s clear that to Batman every last little detail matters, no matter how useless they may be in the present.

Talon breathes in deeply, before unexpectedly turning his hand over and squeezing Jason's in return. It makes the warmth rush back into his face, even as he reflects that, based on that observation, they're likely going to be in for a long night.

Making himself as comfortable as he can bear to, Jason settles in to listen to Talon and Batman talk.

It's almost dawn by the time they leave. Jason is exhausted, so is Talon, and as the door finally shuts behind the last swirl of a black cape, he feels ready to do nothing more than crawl down and sleep beneath the table. He makes himself get up, though, at least long enough to make sure the door is locked again (and that Batman didn't break said lock coming in).

"How are you doing, T?" he asks gently, once that's done and he's back at the table.

Talon, who had eventually sat down in the chair next to Jason, now looks up at him with his arms wrapped around his drawn up legs. He blinks once, twice, then in a voice thickened by tiredness, bluntly says, "I hate Batman."

Jason laughs, a shrill, slightly hysterical sound as he collapses back down into his seat. "Yeah, me too. Robin's not so bad, though. I can't..." he licks his lips, finding them painfully dry, "I can't believe that just happened. That they knew your name. That you..."

That you're still here.

Now that Batman is gone, the sheer enormity of what just happened is hitting him like a brick to the face. Batman. Robin. Here in his bar. He wants to flee the place suddenly, go home and batten down the hatches. He wants to pull Talon into his arms and never let go.

Talon, who is watching him now with vivid intensity. "Jason..."

"Yeah?" he asks, with his heart leapt up into his throat.

But what Talon has to say next is nothing like his own thoughts. "You said you didn't know Batman."

In a moment of sharp realisation, Jason experiences an uncomfortable flashback to a conversation held months before.

“I don’t.” he says. Talon didn’t ask the question like an accusation, but there’s still an urgent expectancy in his gaze regarding the answer. A need to know. “I didn’t... I only met him once before when I was twelve, and I was in his company for all of two hours before he got rid of me.”

“Ma Gunn’s School for Boys.” Talon says, fingers curling into the grey fabric of his jeans even tighter. “What happened?”

Jason really doesn’t want to tell this story now. He doesn’t know how Talon even has the energy or presence of mind to inquire about it, but he also knows he owes it to him to answer honestly. Especially after watching Talon speak for hours about subjects he equally didn’t want to discuss with Batman.

Sighing, he leans back in his seat. “I stole the tyres off the Batmobile.”

Abruptly, Talon sits up straighter. “You what?” he says, slightly breathless.

Contrarily, Jason grimaces. “I was young, and dumb, and one day I came out of my squat and that big stupid car was just sitting there, totally unguarded in Crime Alley. So I figured, hey, why not? I was hungry, and I knew tyres like that would go for a lot of money through the fences I used. The first two I stole I got away with, but then I got greedy, went back for the others. Which is when he caught me.”

Jason pauses to reflect for a moment on that, then briefly smiles. “Well, didn’t quite catch me, not to start. I socked him in the gut with my tyre iron and ran off first. Made it all the way back home, thinking I was safe. But of course I wasn’t. He found me, asked if I lived there, where my folks were... I told him most of the truth about them. Then he made me put the tyres back.”

Talon is leaning forward now. He doesn’t say anything, but the enthralled curve of his body radiates attention.

“There was a place — pretty close by, actually. Ma Gunn’s. Half-orphanage, half-school. He said he wanted to help me, said going there would be a chance for me to set my life straight. That it’d be better than stealing tyres and living in abandoned buildings.” By now, Jason’s smile has faded. And he says, quieter, “And y’know, I

actually... I believed him, for a second. Thought things would be different, because Batman took me there. Except..." He clenches his jaw, remembering. "Except the moment the door closed behind him, Ma Gunn had the other boys holding a knife to my throat. Turns out the whole place was some kinda sick front for criminal activity and she thought Batman had sent me in there to spy for him. I barely escaped with my life from it."

Talon's eyes are wider now. "I'm sorry, Jason." he says.

Jason shrugs, echoes of the bruises that had littered his body then sending phantom pain running through his muscles. "It's fine. Doesn't matter now. I got out of there, grabbed my stuff from my squat, and moved to a new place that same day. Never saw her or Batman again, though a few months later I did hear the school got shut down and Ma Gunn arrested. I guess that was his work."

Drawing in a deep breath, Jason pushes the feelings of anger and resentment that comes with the knowledge away. "In the end, I got out of that life without his help. Made something better of myself by myself." He looks into Talon's eyes again. "That's the truth."

Quiet follows. Jason chews his lip through it, watching Talon think. Watching him consider. Watching him, still here and whole, parse through all that Jason has told him.

Watching him.

Talon breathes in sharply, then evidently having decided he's heard all he needs to hear on the subject and isn't going to snap at Jason for lying to him, however inadvertently, moves on by forcibly changing it. "You stood up to Batman for me."

A blush covers Jason's cheeks. "Well, yeah. I wasn't just going to let him take you. Though I gotta admit, I was hoping you'd take the opportunity to run when I did it."

"You stood up to the most dangerous man in Gotham with a baseball bat, for me."

His blush deepens. "I—"

Jason doesn't get to finish whatever he was about to say, because suddenly Talon is leaning over towards him, closing the distance between their chairs. At this proximity, Jason can count every single one of his eyelashes, see the brilliance of his golden eyes up close, and

it doesn't stop there.

The touch of lips of his own is no more than a peck, really. Brief, clumsy and impulsive. But the reaction it sends through Jason is like a lightning bolt, leaving his mouth tingling with electricity. "Talon," he breathes afterwards, stunned.

"Was that all right?" Talon looks nervous as he draws back from him, just far enough for Jason to see the worried lines on his face.

"I..."

"Stacy said you wanted me to do it."

Stacy, Jason thinks blearily. He's going to kill Stacy. Or maybe he won't, depending on what happens next. It's as much a surprise to know the two of them have been talking together about him than anything else. "She did?"

Talon nods, head bobbing in birdlike motion. "Yes. And... and she also said that if I wanted to as well, I'd have to do it first, because you never would."

Jason's chest briefly seizes. It feels like none of this is real. Like it's all some weird, trippy nightmare bleeding into a more pleasant dream. First Batman, now... "You—you wanted to?" he stammers.

Talon tilts his head at him, and brief exasperation flickers across his golden gaze. "Yes, of course I do. Everything is my choice, remember?"

Having his own words to Talon repeated back to him is both a reprimand and validation. Jason blinks rapidly, and finds himself fighting hard to stop the resulting wave of exhilaration that wants to rise up out of his chest from taking over everything else. It's too much suddenly, to know that Talon wants him as well. That everything he's secretly been desiring for weeks is now within his reach. He can look, perhaps touch. He can...

He swallows hard, "I remember."

Talon's expression is back to pensive again. Jason finds himself growing quickly distracted by the line of his nose, the shape of his lips. The way his dark eyebrows arch so expressively above his eyes. "So did you? Want to?"

It takes his brain a moment to catch up to the question, and so slow-witted, what comes out of Jason is pure honesty. "More than anything else."

Talon smiles then, beatifically. It's the most wonderful, radiant expression Jason's ever seen on him, so of course he has to immediately go and ruin it by continuing, "I just want you to be sure first. There's more out there than this place, than me."

First hurt, then annoyance, flashes over Talon's face.

"How many times do I have to tell you," he says, reaching out and taking tight hold of Jason's wrist with his hand. "I don't want anyone else. Anything else. All I want to do is stay here with you, Jason."

"I..."

The grip tightens as Talon's eyes stay fixated on his own. "You promised you were going to stop doubting me."

Guilt runs tightly through Jason's stomach. "I'm not trying to doubt you," he swallows, "I just..."

"You what?" Talon tilts his head, waiting for him to continue. "Why can't you just accept this?"

Jason looks down at where those warm fingers are touching him, deceptively slender and strong. He wants nothing more than to turn his hand over and return the grip. Yet the expression on Talon's face and his own crippling self-doubt stalls him. He can't because—

"No one ever chooses me."

"What?" The hawkish look in Talon's eyes fades slightly, softens.

Jason bites the inside of his cheek to make himself say the rest of it. "No one ever chooses me. Not my parents, not Batman, not... No matter who they are, sooner or later I always get left behind. I've never had a real relationship before, never even really had friends outside the people at work. Not before you came along, anyway, and I... I'm not stupid. You go through something enough times, you soon start to realise what the problem is." He squeezes his other hand into a fist. "It's not you I'm doubting, T. It's me."

Talon stares at him for a moment, then his jaw clenches with an emotion Jason's only seen on him once before, back on the night Phil

threatened him. Utter fury.

“You’re wrong.” he says, “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. Everyone who left you, they didn’t do it because of what you did, Jason; they did it because they were bad people, or they made mistakes like Batman did. They didn’t see how good you are, how kind and generous. I do.”

“T...” Jason whispers.

“You always tell me I’m not bad for how the Court treated me, or for doing what I had to do to survive. The same goes for you.” He squeezes Jason’s wrist so hard it almost hurts. “You saved me, Jason. Both on the night I met you and tonight. You taught me how to be something other than an assassin. You...” Talon stops, licking his lips. It’s maybe the most Jason’s ever seen him talk at once, and he can see that he’s struggling with it. “You’re the best person I’ve ever met, and anyone who ever makes you feel otherwise...” He screws up his face. “They can go fuck themselves.”

Jason blinks, then despite the situation and his own roiling feelings, laughs. It’s such a patently un-Talonlike thing to say, and he knows exactly where he got it from. “They can, huh?”

Talon nods.

Shit. Jason reaches up with his free hand, rubbing at his eyes. He feels just as shocked and off-balance as he did the night Talon offered to kill Phil for him. The night he told Jason he was the only person he thought worth killing for again, and as the memory of that moment flows back to him, coupled with what’s happening now, he also realises he can’t fight this any longer. Talon is determined, and he can’t... he’s not strong enough to stand against him. Not about this.

“You’re right,” Jason says, hoarsely. “You’re right. I’m sorry, T. I’m being an idiot. I don’t know who I’m trying to protect more, you or me, but I...” he looks into his eyes. “Just tell me one more time — you’re sure?”

Delicately, Talon reaches up with his other hand and brushes back Jason’s hair. “I am. I want to stay with you, Jason. Always.”

Jason can’t think of anything else to say then. His throat feels too tight for speech, his eyes too watery. So instead he leans forward and kisses Talon again, this time of his own accord, letting it linger longer than that first one did. Still chaste, but warm and soft, and hopefully filled

with all the things he can't otherwise put into words.

If this works... if it really works...

No, he doesn't want to think about the nebulous future anymore. Just the here and now, with Talon's lips against his own. It won't be easy, he knows, not for two people like them, both with dark, complicated histories running along behind them, but perhaps if they are both determined enough, none of that will matter in the end.

The only way to know for sure is to try.

"I can't believe this is really happening." he says quietly, when they part again. "I can't believe..." Drawing in a shaky breath, he allows himself to smile. "You know she had a bet on us."

"Who did?" Talon looks softly pleased, licking his lips in a way that is effortlessly distracting to Jason.

"Stacy, her and Kyle. They had a bet on whether or not we were together. He owes her ten bucks now." Technically twenty, counting what she would have already paid him after Jason told her they weren't in a relationship before.

"Oh." Talon considers it a moment, then shrugs. "That's okay, I like her better than Kyle."

Reaching up, Jason takes Talon's hand from his hair and holds it in his own. "Me too."

Filled with a sudden desire to get out of the bar, Jason stands up from his chair and gently tugs Talon along with him. He doesn't care that the close down still needs to be finished. That if he leaves now, there'll be money sitting in the register all day and paperwork left undone. All those problems and more — including Talon's new status as a Bat parolee — can wait until later.

"Come on, T, let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Stacy is the true MVP of this fic.

End Notes

[Fire's tumblr](#)

[Penta's tumblr](#)

Works inspired by this one

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